

Bob Arvin

Destined for Greatness

BY BILL NICKELS

Ypsilanti Beginnings

Our country was in the middle of World War II when Carl Arvin served his country as a Military Police officer. Carl and his wife Dorothy's first child, Carl Robert "Bob" Arvin, was born, in 1943, while Carl served. In the years to come, the couple would learn the ways in which the military would come to affect their lives.

The family moved to Ypsilanti and lived at 907 Pleasant Drive for most of Bob's youth. He was a prize-winning paper boy for the *Ann Arbor News* while he attended St. John's Elementary School. Joining Boy Scout Troop 240, Bob became an Eagle Scout and counseled younger scouts at Bruin Lake Boy Scout Camp. Neighborhood girl Merry Lynn Montonye frequently saw Bob at Recreation Park. According to Merry Lynn, they never became friends because he was "playing with sticks and doing boy stuff."

When it came time to attend high school in 1957, Bob enrolled at Ypsilanti High. Excelling in both team and individual sports, he played varsity football for four years and was the team's starting quarterback. Bob also wrestled for four years. During his senior year, he was the 154-pound state champion and co-captain when Ypsilanti High won the state championship. Wrestling teammate Tino Lambros remembers "the long, cold, and dark school bus trips to Lansing, Battle Creek, Kalamazoo, and other places. Bob would curl up in those 'wonderful' bus seats, pull out a small flashlight and a book, and study."

Among his circle of friends in high school was captain of the cheerleaders Merry Lynn Montonye. The two dated sporadically, even when Merry Lynn, who was a year older than Bob, went off to Duke University.

Bob's club activities included four years on the debate team and four years with forensics. He was also chosen to be the lead in the school play and spent two years with the school newspaper. He was student council president in the eleventh grade and class president in the twelfth. Bob graduated as valedictorian of his class and was elected



Bob Arvin and Merry Lynn Montonye at his State Championship wrestling banquet, 1961

to the National Honor Society. In 1989, classmate Dr. Frank Sayre remembered: “Greatness was in his life. If anyone was destined for major accomplishments, for a national presence, it was Bob Arvin.”

West Point

Upon graduation from high school, Bob received scholarship offers from Harvard and six other schools. Bob’s mom said, “A Yale scholarship didn’t turn Bob’s head--he was West Point bound.” He became a plebe at the U.S. Military Academy, in July 1961. The following summer, at Camp Buckner, New York, he distinguished himself by winning both the Triathlon (swimming, cross country, and rifle) and “Recondo” competitions. The latter was a hand-to-hand combat pit fight where he was the last man standing among better than 700 classmates.

Bob was a star athlete at West Point, lettering in wrestling during all three of his varsity years. During his senior year, he was elected captain. His coach was instrumental in the creation of the Arvin Wrestling Award, which is given annually to “the graduating member of the wrestling team who best exemplifies the qualities of Carl Robert Arvin in the areas of leadership, scholarship, and commitment to Army wrestling.”

Bob was also active in other areas of student life. He was a leader in the Student Conference on U.S. Affairs (SCUSA). SCUSA was a four-day conference where students discussed issues facing our country. His editorial interests continued as co-editor of the HOITZER student publication. A devout Catholic, Bob was a member of the Catholic Chapel Choir and a chapel acolyte.

After Merry Lynn graduated from Duke, her first teaching job was in White Plains, New York, a short drive from West Point. She said their relationship ran hot and cold during this time.

It is the responsibility of General Davison, Commandant of Cadets, to select the First Captain and Brigade Commander of the Corps of Cadets during their senior year. He remembered “It was my privilege as Commandant to select Bob to be First Captain. I admired him greatly; he was a concerned, compassionate leader who held the complete respect of his fellow cadets.” As First Captain, Bob hosted former president Dwight D. Eisenhower for the Fiftieth Reunion of the Class of 1915 and together they broke ground for a new campus building.

Bob graduated 44th out of a class of 596 in 1965. He was a recipient of the Persh-

ing Writing Award, given to the graduate who best reflected on his four years at West Point and what it meant to him. As the cadet who best exemplified the traditions of the United States Military Academy and the United States Army, he also received the Association of the United States Army Award. For exhibiting military efficiency, he won the Avarian Award. Bob was also a finalist for a Rhodes Scholarship.

United States Army

After graduation as a second lieutenant, Bob went to Fort Benning, Georgia, in August 1965, for specialized training. He completed both Ranger and Airborne Jumpmaster schools. He selected the famed 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, as his first assignment. The selection of the 82nd Airborne was indicative of his desire to serve up front with the action.

While in Ranger school, Bob's West Point friend Mike Moseley invited Bob and Merry Lynn to a beach house in Delaware. During the drive, Bob asked Merry Lynn to marry him. Their marriage took place on July 30, 1966, back in Ypsilanti, at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church. They had nine months together before Bob left for Vietnam, in early 1967, as an advisor in the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV).

Vietnam

Bob Arvin reported to his advisory detachment, the 7th Vietnamese Airborne Battalion, in May 1967. His West Point classmate, Chuck Hemingway, also with the 7th Battalion, was killed in June 1967. Bob was assigned to take his place.

The 7th Battalion was assigned to protect the vital Hue Phu Bai Air Base near the town of Hue. Hue was in the center of a cluster of towns that included Khe Sanh and



Former President Dwight Eisenhower, left, returned to West Point for his 50th class reunion in 1965 and attends a groundbreaking along with Arvin, second from left.

As West Point's First Captain, Bob hosts President Eisenhower's fiftieth West Point class reunion, 1965

Da Nang just south of the DMZ that separated North and South. Bob served as an advisor to the 7th Battalion, and the U.S. Army later officially recognized his value, stating: “Captain Arvin was noted for the inspiration he provided the Vietnamese soldiers and was instrumental in assisting them in successfully accomplishing their missions.”

The pace and intensity of the war picked up during the summer of 1967. According to the U.S. Army, on 5 September 5, 1967:

the battalion was deployed in a three-pronged assault on suspected enemy positions. As the unit approached the objective area, the entire left flank came under intense mortar and small-arms fire from Viet Cong

bunker and trench complexes located on the rice paddy perimeters. An element on the left flank was overwhelmed by the fierce fire and withdrew, leaving Captain Arvin, his counterpart, and two radio operators alone. Undaunted by the perilous circumstances, Captain Arvin led the group forward to engage the enemy. In doing so, one of the radio operators was wounded. Although wounded himself, Captain Arvin, with complete disregard for his personal safety, moved through enemy fire to the man and dragged him to a relatively protected location. Returning to the group, he began directing repeated armed helicopter gunship strikes as all elements of the battalion now engaged the enemy. Then, heedless of the increasing volume of enemy fire, Captain Arvin established a landing zone and supervised the evacuation of the wounded. Refusing evacuation himself, he returned to the front to continue to advise and assist in the conduct of the battle. As a direct result of Captain Arvin’s indomitable fighting spirit, positive leadership, and calm courage throughout the hours-long battle, the insurgents were forced from their positions, and the 7th Battalion was able to secure the objective.

Following a brief hospitalization, Bob returned to his battalion, which was preparing to clear enemy forces from the air base. Again, according to the U.S. Army, on October 8, 1967:



Bob after completing both Ranger and Airborne training, 1966

Bob's unit was completing a sweep of a suspected enemy base when an entrenched regiment was engaged. Captain Arvin was accompanying the battalion in a sweep of suspected enemy positions when the unit came under intense hostile mortar and automatic weapons fire. As the volume of enemy fire increased, Captain Arvin called for helicopter gunships for support. Realizing that the battalion was facing a determined enemy, Captain Arvin left his relatively safe position and raced through fire-swept fields to a forward position where he expertly began directing the gunships on target. With enemy activity temporarily suppressed, the battalion continued to move forward until it was resubjected to punishing mortar and small-arms fire. Once again Captain Arvin valiantly and in full view of enemy gunners, moved through the fire to a forward vantage point. There, as fighting raged about him, he directed extremely accurate, close range gunship passes onto enemy positions. As a direct result of Captain Arvin's unremitting attention to duty, resolute courage, and superb direction of ground forces and supporting aircraft, a strong and determined enemy was forced to flee in defeat.

For these actions, the Army stated: "Captain Arvin's conspicuous gallantry in action was in keeping with the time-honored traditions of the United States Army and reflected great credit upon himself and the military service."

Bob was mortally wounded by small arms fire, on October 8, 1967, and he died on the field of battle. Bob had been days away from a transfer to Saigon to join the staff of General William Westmoreland,.

Bob's body was returned to Ypsilanti to lie in state in St. John's, the first layman to do so in that church. Two days later, a Catholic funeral mass was held. His school and Boy Scout life began in the same church that presided over the end of his life.

Bob was buried at West Point, on October 17, 1967, with military honors. Mourners included Bob's family, the West Point wrestling team, members of the 82nd Airborne, and the Superintendent of the Academy. In a letter to Bob's parents, General Westmoreland wrote "He was one of the most outstanding young men I have had the privilege of knowing. The Army has lost one of its future leaders."

Posthumous Honors

For the engagement with the enemy on September 5, Bob was posthumously promoted to captain and awarded a Silver Star for gallantry in action and a Purple Heart for the wound he received. For the October 8th engagement Bob was awarded a second Silver Star Oak Leaf Cluster for his gallantry that day and a Purple Heart because of his mortal wounds.

On February 25, 1989, West Point renamed the cadet gym the Arvin Gymnasium in honor of Bob. In 2005, the Arvin Cadet Physical Development Center was dedicated. Like Eisenhower, Sherman, Lee, MacArthur, Pershing, and Grant, the name Arvin on

a West Point building honors a West Point military hero.

Bob Arvin was memorialized locally too. When the Michigan Military Museum opened in 1987, Bob's service was honored with a display of some of his military possessions. On June 15, 2002, the Ypsilanti Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2408 named their post the C. Robert Arvin VFW Post 2408. Items from the Michigan Military Museum were shared with the VFW. In 2012, the Arvin display moved to the Ypsilanti Historical Museum in order to give the display more visibility.

Also, on June 15, 2002, VFW Post 2408 created the Captain C. Robert Arvin Educational Fund to honor Bob's legacy of excellence. By 2004, golf fundraisers brought in enough money to award \$1000 annual scholarships to between six and twelve local high school graduates.

Ypsilanti High School initiated an Athletic Hall of Fame in 2004. Bob's considerable athletic achievements were honored in the second induction, on September 30, 2005. He is now immortalized in the school that provided the environment that allowed him to grow into the leader he became.

A Note on Sources

Information for this article comes from conversations with Bob's friends and newspaper clippings. All images are from the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

About the Author

Bill Nickels is President of the Ypsilanti Historical Society and Professor Emeritus of Chemistry at Schoolcraft College. He served ten years on the Ypsilanti Historic District Commission and twelve years on the Ypsilanti City Council (Ward 2). He is also a long-time member and past president of the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation Board.