



Rick Johnson 1951 – 2007

Richard Johnson died of a stroke at the beginning of November, only a few days after participating in the MMSI monthly meeting on West Point.

It's hard to describe Rick to people who didn't know him, because there were so many facets to his personality. He was a force of nature. You didn't know Rick — you experienced him. This extraordinary vitality makes it doubly hard for his friends to come to grips with his no longer being with us.

Rick grew up in the Chicago suburbs and attended Deerfield High School. From there he went on to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he graduated with the Class of 1973. After leaving military service he worked as a patent attorney in Chicago, during which time he became an active member of the MMSI. He moved to Los Angeles for professional reasons some years ago, but still maintained close ties with his friends in Chicago. He never missed an October show, and was an enthusiastic supporter of the annual figure auction.

Although he was a successful attorney, Rick derived his greatest satisfaction from his enviable circle of friends. Never shy, he eagerly struck up conversations with total strangers of all ages and made friends easily. In fact, he might never have become involved with the MMSI at all if he had not fallen into conversation with Joe Berton at a Cubs game.

Rick had friends all over the world. While a captain in the army in Korea, he was called upon to give a

briefing to some Korean officers. Even though he didn't speak a word of Korean, he had his presentation translated, memorized it by rote, and gave the entire briefing in a language he didn't know. No one had ever done this before, and it so impressed his audience that he was decorated by the Korean government before he left the country.

He had a wide range of interests and indulged his lifelong interest in military history by collecting uniforms, medals and insignia. When I first met Rick, he was collecting German World War II items. He walked into my living room, and gaped in amazement at all the bright red coats in my British collection. I later teased Rick that it was like watching the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus: he was struck blind and fell to his knees, babbling in tongues. When he staggered back to his feet, he was a British collector.

As the years went by, I sometimes wondered if I had created a Frankenstein. He seemed to buy everything that wasn't nailed down. We nicknamed him "ITI" for "I'll take it!" Rick once joked "I spend all my money on two things: women and militaria. I still have the militaria."

One of the things that Rick enjoyed most in his collection was a trumpet that actually sounded the charge of the light brigade. Not only did he own the trumpet, but he also had a recording made many years after the event of the trumpeter sounding the charge on the very same instrument.

Although he was raised in Illinois and spent most of his life north of the Mason-Dixon line, Rick loved to play the role of the dyed-in-the-wool Confederate. I would often point out to him that being born on a US government installation separated by a barbed wire fence from the state of Virginia didn't really qualify him as a true son of the Confederacy, but he, of course, never saw it that way. I sometimes think he only went to West Point because the uniform was gray.

Rick was famous among his friends for his wonderful stories and the delight he took in telling them. He was especially proud of his time at West Point and told from personal experience some of the funniest stories ever to come out of the academy. Some years ago, Rick and a group of friends went to see the movie "American Pie." There was a character in the movie who prefaced everything she said with "There was this time at band camp..." We all enjoyed the movie, and as we walked out of the theater, I turned to Rick said, "Come on, Ricky, tell us about band camp!" From that point on, a story that might once have started "When I was a cadet " would often be prefaced instead by "There was this time at band camp..."

On the serious side, the honor code Rick encountered at West Point became the guiding principle of his personal and professional life. Rick loved the army, but a major reason he left was that a senior officer ordered him to do something that violated that code. Under protest he did as he was told, but he was so disillusioned by the experience that he resigned his commission shortly thereafter.

Rick was so much fun to be with that people forget that he had his thoughtful side, too. Rick had opinions on everything. Like the Harvard man, he was sometimes mistaken but never in doubt. Over the years our conversations ranged across a broad range of subjects. He always had an interesting point of view and was able to present his ideas in a logical and well thought-out manner. His politics tended to be different from mine, but he always respected my opinion and I respected his.

Perhaps Rick's greatest personal attribute was his extraordinary generosity. He loved buying gifts for even casual acquaintances, and friends in need discovered that Rick was always ready to assist them, financially or otherwise, when they needed him most.

As many of you know, Rick was a serious John Wayne fan. He watched every movie the Duke ever starred in, some of them many times over. When he was a cadet, he would often sneak out of his room late at night to watch the Duke on the late show. His Tac officer once told him, "You realize, Johnson, I can catch you anytime I want just by looking at the TV listings in the morning paper."

"That may be true, sir," Rick replied with a grin, "but you haven't caught me yet."

He made it a personal point always to applaud when John Wayne's name appeared in the opening credits. This habit became so well known that when he went into town from Fort Benning to see "The Shootist" and clapped during the credits, a voice came out of the darkness, yelling, "Hey, Captain Johnson!"

He once told me that he always closed his eyes whenever John Wayne kissed a woman other than Maureen O'Hara. I was never quite sure if he was really serious about that one, but I'd like to think he was.

Some years ago Rick's father was in Las Vegas and happened to be in the hotel lobby when John Wayne passed through. His dad pushed through the crowd, thrust out a pocket tape recorder, and asked "Mr. Wayne, can you say hello to my son Rick?" Wayne did so, and Rick always said that when he was feeling low, he'd put on the tape, listen to the Duke, and feel much better about himself.

I'd like to think that when Rick arrives at the pearly gates, there will be an honor guard in gray lined up to greet him, and that one of the first sounds he hears will be a gruff, familiar voice saying, "Hi, Rick. How are ya?"

I'd also like to think that wafting softly in the background will be some of the final words of the West Point Alma Mater:

And when our work is done,
Our course on earth is run,
May it be said, 'Well done;
Be thou at peace."