



MY OPINION

BY BOB BLACK

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Let Us Give Thanks

For Veterans Day last year, I volunteered at a clinic to help veterans. More than 30 lawyers assisted about 100 veterans. In chatting with other volunteers, I learned that two of the lawyers — professionals I have known and respected for years — lost their fathers in Vietnam. They were volunteering to honor their fathers, who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. As we honor all who have served this Veterans Day and as we contemplate all for which we are grateful this Thanksgiving, let us be mindful of those who have made this possible. This column honors Maj. Taylor Douglas Johnson and Sgt. Harry Tracy Richardson, in the words of their children.



Maj. Taylor Douglas Johnson and Leanne Johnson



Every time I read about or see a news broadcast about a wounded or fallen soldier and the grief-stricken family, my heart is flooded with empathy and sympathy for the soldiers and for their parents, spouses, children, and other family members. What a heavy burden each carries. As attorneys, we have a wonderful opportunity through the *Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans* initiative to lessen that burden by volunteering.

My father, Maj. Taylor Douglas Johnson (1st Cavalry Division, U.S. Army), was killed in Vietnam. His story and that of our family are like many others. I was four years old when my father was killed, my brother was five, and my sister eight.



Maj. Taylor Douglas Johnson in Vietnam, Christmas 1965.

He was born in Joaquin, Texas, in 1929. He enjoyed working on his grandparents' farm and was an active member of Future Farmers of America. He attended Stephen F. Austin State University, where he obtained a B.S. in agriculture. In 1953, he chose to join the Army as a private, but they offered him an opportunity to become an officer. In September 1953, he accepted a commission as a 2nd lieutenant upon graduation from Officer Candidate School. During his career, he served in Korea and Vietnam. While in the Army, he completed his M.B.A. at Lehigh University, graduated from flight school, became a fixed wing pilot, and then later became a Chinook helicopter pilot. He commenced his tour in Vietnam on Aug. 16, 1965, and was killed on Jan. 28, 1966, while piloting a CH-47 Chinook helicopter.

The name of the helicopter was the "Lea-Ta-Sue." The name was derived from part of my name, Leanne; part of my brother's name, Taylor; and part of my sister's name, Suzanne.

I vividly remember Jan. 29, 1966, because at the very moment my mother, Mary E. Johnson, was being told about my father's death, my brother and I were racing through the house. We managed to bump into each other and I fell against a sharp edge of the door and cut a large gash into the side of my head. My mother had the presence of mind to take me to the emergency room where I received several stitches.

It took two weeks before my father's body was returned to Texas, and during that time, my mother was only given limited information. When she finally met the train in Longview, one of the first things she wanted to know was whether he had suffered from burns. The officer who accompanied the casket provided some further details, and Mother was thankful that he had not been burned and that the helicopter he was flying had not crashed.

I have a somewhat muddled recollection of the next few days, weeks, months, and even early years that followed. My sister and brother were school aged, and they attended school while I stayed at home with my mother. I recall how tears would flow from my mother's cheeks while cooking dinner, vacuuming, or cleaning. And, although I witnessed the heartache and pain, my mother displayed such courage and determination to keep going, keep forging ahead, one day at a time as she picked up the pieces of her shattered life. My father was only 36 years old when he was killed. And, my mother was 30. She never remarried and still finds it very difficult to talk about the painful memories.

I am thankful that I have had the resources to assist me in learning more information about my father's service to our country. For example, I found a book online in the military history section of the

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Army Archives written by Lt. Gen. John J. Tolson, *Vietnam Studies, Airmobility 1961-1971*, which includes a chapter on the use of Chinooks in Vietnam. It includes this specific reference to my father:

The Brigade had been supported throughout this operation by the 133d Assault Support Helicopter Company with 16 Chinooks. The CH-47 Chinook had proved essential in moving artillery and resupplying the Brigade with ammunition and supplies. Night resupply was often required. On 28 January seven Chinooks made an emergency resupply mission during weather conditions consisting of extremely low ceilings and poor visibility, and six of the seven committed helicopters were hit by enemy ground fire. The company commander, Major Taylor D. Johnson, was killed while attempting to recover a downed OH-13 scout helicopter. Despite the weather and the enemy fire, the 16 Chinooks assigned to this company during the period 1 January through 31 January flew 526 hours transferring 3,212 passengers and over 1600 tons of cargo.

My siblings and I were fortunate to have two parents who demonstrated courage and sacrifice. Even though my mother lived on a very tight budget, she clothed, fed, loved, encouraged, and assisted us daily. All three children graduated from high school and attended college. Only now that I am an adult do I have a better appreciation for the sacrifices made by both of my parents. One died and the other was left behind to live each day and face the heartache and hardships from that death.

I will never know how many nights my mother was awakened by a nightmare, or how much effort she made to ensure that each of her children had a safe and secure home, or how many prayers she voiced to God that He would help her get through one more day. I am sure that our veterans and their families go through all of this and more as they grieve and heal from their physical and emotional wounds.



Sgt. Harry Tracy Richardson and Tracy Richardson



Tracy Richardson

Three words we should all strive to live and practice by are duty, honor, and character. We have a duty to ourselves, our fellow attorneys, and to the constitutions for the state of Texas and the United States to practice in a fair and civil manner. We must remember the high price paid for our freedom to practice law by our founding fathers and the military personnel who make daily sacrifices. Often, we easily forget and jeopardize our rights by the way we interact with other lawyers and lose sight of the word “honor.” Honor and character are difficult words to understand and once compromised, you may never regain them in your personal or professional life.

As for my practice and life, I remember these words on a daily basis as my father wrote about them in his letters from Vietnam and defined them by his actions and death in the jungles of Southeast Asia. While I was only 2 years old at his death, he is the greatest influence on my life. His actions are the ultimate definition of duty and honor and are examples by which I practice. His influence on me is a true reminder of how actions will live longer than words. As such, I ask myself would my father be proud of my actions and have I honored his sacrifice. My father left me with many strengths of character and has influenced my life in many ways. I know of my father’s love for me because of his actions and of his letters sent from Vietnam. I have chosen to draw strength by focusing on advantages he gave by sacrificing his life. While I cannot sit down and talk to him face to face, he does help guide me in my decisions by setting a pattern for how I should live in my personal and professional life.

My father also left me with a family of men who fought beside him and in battles before and after him. These indi-



Sgt. Harry Tracy Richardson

viduals have shared their experiences with me from the battlefields of Europe to the jungles of Southeast Asia and deserts of Afghanistan. My father in some ways made the easy sacrifice, for his pain and suffering ended in 1966 while the veterans who came home have suffered with emotional and physical wounds for years. Today, many still struggle to survive and need our assistance. The *Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans* program established by the State Bar of Texas is one of the most honorable tributes we as attorneys can bestow upon our veterans. By donating our time and allowing them to speak with us about their issues and experiences while serving our nation, we are expressing our thanks for this sacrifice. In many cases, the veterans of today need legal assistance, but in some cases, they need a friend who will listen. I am proud to be a part of this initiative and know my father would be proud of my actions in working on this initiative. Duty, honor, and character are words we shall always remember, for your actions are your legacy.



Let us give thanks to all those who have served our country and those who love and honor them. ★

