

Myron (Mike) B. Carstensen Biography

Pre-WSC Background

Myron B. Carstensen was born on December 26, 1919 in Grand Coulee, Washington to Henry M. Carstensen and Elizabeth Blinn Carstensen.¹ His father was a farmer originally from Germany.² Grand Coulee was a small town in Grant County, located in the Columbia Basin region of central Washington.³ Tribes such as the Interior Salish, Wenatchi, and Okanogan inhabited the region first, with white settlers arriving in the mid-1800s in order to raise livestock. Once railroads connected Grant County to the rest of Washington, newcomers to the area shifted from ranching toward traditional farming.⁴ Poor farming conditions and economic difficulties during the 1920s and 1930s led to a population decrease in Grant County, and by the 1930 United States Census Myron Carstensen and his family were living in Egypt, in Lincoln County, Washington.⁵ Historically, Lincoln County was known as an important wheat producing county in Washington, and Henry Carstensen farmed that crop.⁶

WSC Experience

Carstensen graduated from Almira High School in Lincoln County, and attended Washington State College (WSC) from 1938 through 1940 before transferring to Gonzaga

¹ C. James Quann, *WSU Military Veterans: Heroes and Legends* (Spokane, Washington: Tornado Creek Publications, 2005), 175; “Myron B Carstensen in the 1920 United States Federal Census,” *Ancestry.com*. Carstensen’s year of birth is listed as 1920 in Quann’s book; however, all other documentation, such as his military records on *Ancestry.com*, indicate the correct year is 1919. Given that Carstensen is listed in the 1920 Federal Census, it is conclusive that he was born in 1919 in order for him to be included in those records.

² “Henry M Carstensen in the 1920 United States Federal Census,” *Ancestry.com*.

³ Eric L. Flom, “Grant County – Thumbnail History,” *HistoryLink.org*, <https://historylink.org/File/8010> (Accessed July 4, 2019).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*; “Myron B Carstensen in the 1930 United States Federal Census,” *Ancestry.com*.

⁶ “History,” *Lincoln County Washington*, <https://www.co.lincoln.wa.us/history> (Accessed July 4, 2019); “Henry M Carstensen in the 1930 United States Federal Census,” *Ancestry.com*.

University.⁷ He won a prize of fifty cigarettes in a Philip Morris Contest on campus in 1939, and was a resident of Stimson Hall, a residence hall housing the largest number of men on campus.⁸ Carstensen returned to WSC in 1942 and graduated on May 24, 1943 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science.⁹ He was a member of Sigma Chi, a fraternity co-founded by Ernest O. Holland, former president of WSC, in 1919.¹⁰ He was elected Tribune of the fraternity in 1943.¹¹

Wartime Service and Death

Carstensen registered for the draft on July 1, 1941, at which time his employer was listed as his father, Henry P. Carstensen.¹² Following graduation from WSC in 1943 he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps as a Private, First Class.¹³ Along with WSC alumni Grant Robert Gaines, Carstensen was commissioned a Second Lieutenant on November 3, 1943 after completing basic training at Quantico, Virginia.¹⁴ Following completion of his basic training, he

⁷ Quann, *WSU Military Veterans*, 175.

⁸ "Winners: Philip Morris Contest," *The Evergreen*, November 29, 1939, WSU 1, WSU Publications: Evergreen <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc/finders/wsupubslst.htm> at Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>; "Stimson Hall," *Chinook*, 1940, WSU 46, WSU Publications – Chinooks at Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

⁹ Quann, *WSU Military Veterans*, 175.

¹⁰ "Pledge List," *The Evergreen*, September 29, 1942, WSU 1, WSU Publications: Evergreen <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc/finders/wsupubslst.htm> at Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>; Devin Trubey, "Sigma Chi celebrates 100 years at WSU with new chapter house," *klewtv.com*, <https://klewtv.com/news/local/sigma-chi-celebrates-100-years-at-wsu-with-new-chapter-house> (Accessed July 4, 2019).

¹¹ "Sororities, Fraternities Have House Elections," *The Evergreen*, January 22, 1943, WSU 1, WSU Publications: Evergreen <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc/finders/wsupubslst.htm> at Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

¹² "Myron B Carstensen in the U.S. WWII Draft Cards Young Men, 1940-1947," *Ancestry.com*.

¹³ "Myron B Carstensen in the U.S. Marine Corps Muster Rolls, 1798-1958," *Ancestry.com*.

¹⁴ "Gaines, Carstensen Awarded Gold Bars At Quantico Marine Base," *The Evergreen*, November 12, 1943, WSU 1, WSU Publications: Evergreen <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc/finders/wsupubslst.htm> at Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

graduated with the 40th reserve officers' class from Quantico, Virginia and was shipped overseas with the 2nd Armored Amphibious Battalion in late April, 1944.

The 2nd Armored Amphibian Battalion's orders were to lead "sea-borne shock troops against the Japanese island stronghold of Saipan in the Central Pacific."¹⁵ Their job was to deploy seventy amphibian tanks in an armored first wave attack against the fortified beaches of Saipan, in the Northern Marianas island chain, in order to clear the way for Marine infantrymen to land after them. Saipan had been administered by Japan since Tokyo was awarded a mandate by the League of Nations in 1920, removing it from German rule.¹⁶ After Japan withdrew from the League in 1933 following their invasion of Manchuria, they fortified Saipan in violation of the mandate terms, making it a "formidable target."¹⁷ Code-named "Operation Forager," preparations for the Saipan invasion occurred over a three-month period.

Allied troops began with a naval bombardment of the island on June 13, 1944.¹⁸ Despite more than 180,000 shells of varying calibers fired at the island, damage to Japanese defense fortifications was minimized due to the positions they'd created as well as the underestimation by the Americans about the total number of enemy troops present.¹⁹ Landings began on June 15, with the Marines facing barbed wire installations, machine gun emplacements, and trenches; despite the extensive casualties they suffered, they took the beachhead by nightfall.²⁰

¹⁵ "2nd Armored Amphibian Battalion Marines," *2nd armoredamphibianbattalion.com*, <http://2ndarmoredamphibianbattalion.com/> (Accessed July 5, 2019).

¹⁶ Jeff Kingston, "Battle of Saipan: a brutal invasion that claimed 55,000 lives," *The Japan Times*, July 5, 2014, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/07/05/national/history/battle-saipan-brutal-invasion-claimed-55000-lives/#.XSJIQIhKiUk> (Accessed July 6, 2019).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Battle of Saipan," *historynet.com*, <https://www.historynet.com/battle-of-saipan> (Accessed July 6, 2019).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Carstensen was in the first assault wave on June 15, and his tank was hit by enemy fire while he was still 1200 feet out on the reef. His friend and fellow officer, Lieutenant Charles W. Goodnight, wrote, “All at once I saw his tank smoking and I saw some of his men help him out of the turret....I found out that he got off the burning tank, tried to say something to his men and then collapsed, dead. He was hit with a mortar shell in the side. His last words were some sort of command. That’s what I call typical of Mike.”²¹ The Battle of Saipan ultimately saw victory for Allied troops, but the casualties on both sides were heavy. By the time the battle ended on July 9, 1944, more than 30,000 Japanese soldiers died, along with 22,000 Japanese civilians, many who committed suicide rather than surrender.²² 3,246 Allied troops were killed, with 10,364 wounded.²³

Postwar Legacy

Carstensen was buried at sea on June 16, 1944.²⁴ In a letter to E.O. Holland dated September 11, 1944, Carstensen’s mother, Elizabeth wrote that her surviving children, Margaret and Henry, Jr., “no less than idolized Myron,” and they would come to understand “the sacrifice Myron made for them and humanity.”²⁵ Elizabeth went on to explain that when “one centers the affection we did on Myron it is a test of faith to say with confidence, ‘Thy will be done’.”²⁶ She reported how difficult she found it to understand “Gods design of life for us,” when boys like

²¹ Letter from Lt. Charles W. Goodnight to Mr. & Mrs. Henry Carstensen, July 31, 1944, Box 1, Folder 5, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

²² “Battle of Saipan,” *historynet.com*, <https://www.historynet.com/battle-of-saipan> (Accessed July 6, 2019).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Letter from Lt. Charles W. Goodnight to Mr. & Mrs. Henry Carstensen, July 31, 1944, Box 1, Folder 5, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>. Goodnight notes that burial at sea was “better than being buried on this stinking, bloody island.”

²⁵ Letter from Elizabeth Carstensen to E.O. Holland, September 11, 1944, Box 1, Folder 5, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

“Myron are called upon to lead at the point of attack. We only know when God gives us sons capable and courageous beyond others they are called upon to lead on when others less able are given less responsible work.”²⁷

Elizabeth enclosed letters she received from two of Carstensen’s friends and fellow officers, in which they conveyed their sense of loss upon learning of his death. Lieutenant Charles W. Goodnight described Carstensen as his “dearest buddy,” noting they met while in training in Quantico and had “stuck together through R.O.C., the Tank Battalion and then to the 2nd Armored.”²⁸ He wrote that Carstensen’s men “were utterly devoted to him,” and “were simply stunned when he was killed....They will never forget him as long as they live.”²⁹ Second Lieutenant Wallace J. MacKay’s letter expressed his “shock and sorrow” upon learning of Carstensen’s death.³⁰ MacKay met Carstensen on the train to Parris Island, South Carolina in the summer of 1943. He described him as having “a ready smile, frankness and openhearted generosity,” which “earned him the friendship of almost everyone with whom he came in contact.”³¹ MacKay remembered Carstensen’s “intense love for his family and home,” and that “his actions and good humor spoke even more eloquently of the soundness of his background and the admirable balance of his training.”³²

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Letter from Lt. Charles W. Goodnight to Mr. & Mrs. Henry Carstensen, July 31, 1944, Box 1, Folder 5, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Letter from Second Lieutenant Wallace J. Mackay to Mr. & Mrs. Henry Carstensen, undated copy, Box 1, Folder 5, Washington State University Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) <http://libraries.wsu.edu/masc>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

MacKay went on to remark that Carstensen's "most distinctive" quality was "his ability to laugh at himself."³³ He wrote, in part, the following:

A fellow like that is never a liability. That's why he was a great asset to the Marine Corps. I know Mike loved the Corps and was proud to wear its uniform. And I know I speak for the Corps when I say we were proud of him and were happy he was one of us.

As a matter of fact, I can't help but feel that he still is one of us. He lives in our minds and has added to the highest traditions which we esteem. Mike's death is a living, triumphant reason why we shall go on until we have won, why we will never be defeated, why the next peace will be a lasting one.

*Through the clouds of your sorrow, you must see the bright light of Mike has done, the sacrifices he has made for you, for me, for all of us.*³⁴

Carstensen was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart. He is memorialized at the Tablets of the Missing at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (Punchbowl) in Honolulu, Hawaii.³⁵

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Carstensen in the World War II and Korean Conflict Veterans Interred Overseas," *Ancestry.com*; "Myron B Carstensen," *honorstates.org*, <https://www.honorstates.org/index.php?id=122981> (Accessed July 5, 2019).