

Love takes work, as everyone knows. For some people the work involves navigating personal differences. For others it means dealing with a medical crisis.

For Johnnie and Ruth Carr, it has meant dealing with separation during World War II, during which he was held as a prisoner of war for 492 days; it has meant sticking with one another while moving from state to state for job transfers; and it has meant figuring out when to pass on the work required of caretakers of Alzheimer's patients.

The Bastrop couple will celebrate their 61<sup>st</sup> wedding anniversary on Feb. 23, but Ruth Carr will probably not be aware of the day's significance. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 1997, though her son, Johnnie Carr Jr., had suspected something was amiss years earlier.

Johnnie Carr Sr. said this anniversary is important because it will effectively be their last – father and son agreed to place her in a nursing home in Lockhart in March. Ruth Carr is in the advanced stages of the disease now and does not recognize her husband or children.

“All faces are equally familiar to her,” Johnnie Carr Jr. said.

Johnnie Carr Sr. said he will use the extra time to work on typing his memoirs. He has a rich life story, complete with fairy tale romance, an escape from Russian soldiers just after World War II and humorous hijinks from his youth to present day.

### **Johnnie Carr meets Ruth Seward**

Johnnie Carr was from San Antonio and Ruth Seward was from Lampasas. In November 1941, Carr said his army outfit had a parade in Lampasas. After the parade, the soldiers were taken to the high school gym for a dance with the local girls.

Carr said he stood right in the middle of the gym and scanned every girl. He picked Seward. In December 1941 he asked her to marry him. “And she didn't have enough sense to say no,” he said.

But love is not that easy. The Army transferred Carr to Florida in March 1942. Seward planned to meet him there, but then he was transferred to Camp Edwards in Massachusetts in August 1942. Seward arranged to travel by train to Boston, and the trip gave her a lesson about the work love requires.

Carr said he had plans to meet her at the station at 3:30 p.m., but somewhere along the way, she was put on a special train that was to arrive early. She sent a message to the army base, but Carr never got it. When he arrived, she wasn't at the station.

He asked around and found out she had arrived early and left the station in a cab. Carr and several friends searched all around Boston for Seward and finally found her sitting on her suitcase in a pharmacy.

She was not too mad, though – they obtained a marriage license shortly after her arrival, and had a military wedding on Feb. 23, 1943.

Thirty-six days later Carr was shipped overseas, and his new bride moved back to Lampasas.

### **Years apart**

Carr shipped out to Africa as a member of the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry “Texas” Division, landing at Oran, Algeria. He trained from April to August and then battled in Italy. On January 21, 1944, he was involved in the crossing of the Rapido River, between Naples and Rome in Italy, a battle considered by historians to be one of the worst defeats America suffered during World War II. The river crossing was a maneuver intended to divert German forces while Allied units prepared to take Rome. But the river's current was fast and the German's were prepared,

thwarting several crossing attempts. Carr said he and four fellow soldiers made it across the river but the Germans were waiting for them. Carr was taken as a prisoner of war.

“I told Ruth, don’t you worry, I’ll be back,” Carr said, “but I also told her ‘they’re not going to take me a prisoner of war. They’ll have to kill me.’ I’ve learned not to make that type of promise.”

Carr and a large number of other Americans were put in boxcars and shipped from Italy to Germany. He remained a prisoner of war for 492 days, during which time he stayed in seven different camps. He was considered a ‘problem prisoner’ because he kept trying to escape, he said.

To stay sane in the camps, Carr and his fellow prisoners pulled a number of hijinks on the German guards. One involved disassembling a section of the fence encasing the camp’s ‘dead zone.’ In the middle of the night, Carr and fellow prisoners took the fence apart post by post, rolling up the barbed wire. When the searchlight from the guard tower swung their way, they would stand against the nearest post so their shadow would appear to have been cast by the fence.

After they were done they went back to bed, and in the morning enjoyed the chagrin of the German guards.

But Carr’s tricks caught up to him. One day he was taken into an office and interrogated by member of the Gestapo. He said he realized if he answered his questions, he’d be beaten anyway, so he refused to answer. He said he does not remember much of what happened, but he was beaten for four of five days.

Then they put him in a cell where he was fed only water and bread. An old guard would bring him scraps of meat. That guard, he said, probably saved his life.

He was finally taken to another camp, then to a hospital camp after suffering a medical condition due to a dietary deficiency. He was at that camp when the prisoners were liberated by the Russian Army.

### **Liberated but not free**

The hospital camp was liberated by the Russians in 1945. Carr was taken to a Russian camp in Risa. but he was not allowed to go back to the U.S. President Eisenhower had refused to turn over Russian POWs because they were being executed as traitors upon their return, Carr said. So the Russian government refused to turn over American POWs.

Carr said he had no intention of remaining a Russian prisoner. He learned that at night, Russian soldiers would get together and drink vodka. One night he told his guard he wanted to drink with the soldiers, which he was allowed to do. The next night he did the same, but stayed out a bit longer. On the third and fourth night he again joined the Russian soldiers, staying a little longer each time.

“On the fifth night I went to go drink with the Russians and I haven’t come back since,” Carr said.

### **Back home but not stationary**

Johnnie Carr finally returned to the U.S. in July 1945 and was in a hospital for 10 days. Then he went back to San Antonio. He sent Ruth Carr a telegram telling her to meet him in San Antonio. But again, she was put on an early train and Johnnie Carr missed her arrival. He said he saw her in a cab heading toward his house as he was heading to the station. When he got back to his house, she was sitting on his front steps with her suitcase.

“My mom used to say it’s a constant theme,” Johnnie Carr Jr. said. “He’s never where he’s supposed to be.”

Once reunited, the couple had their first son, Johnnie Carr Jr. in 1947. Johnnie Carr Sr. worked at Wilson Co. meat packers at the time. The job transferred him to Conroe in 1951 and Austin six months later. In May 1953 they had a second son, Floyd Ray Carr.

In 1958 Johnnie Carr Sr. was transferred to Tyler and later to Ft. Worth, where he was living when he started work at Pacific Finance. He later took a job at UIV Corp., another finance business. Johnnie Carr Sr. transferred nearly a dozen times while at the company. Ruth Carr stuck with him through all the moves.

Finally, he moved to Austin, where Johnnie Carr Jr. lives. While in Florida, the Carrs had bought land in Bastrop, and in 1983, they build a home on the property. Shortly thereafter, heart problems forced Johnnie Carr Jr. to retire.

### **Alzheimer’s sets in**

Johnny Carr Jr. said the official diagnosis came in 1997, but the signs had been there for years. His mother had become increasingly paranoid, he said. They had to changed churches a number of times because Ruth Carr though people were talking about her. Friends and relatives noticed she would be happy with them one day and act as if they had offended her the next.

She is now in the advanced stages of the disease, and caring for her has become too difficult for her husband and son. They plan to place her in a nursing home in March.

But the love that had endured 61 years, including an extended separation and numerous moves, continues. Johnnie Carr Sr. and his son guide her through unfamiliar terrain with the greatest of care.

Johnnie Carr Sr. plans to give their relationship – and his own life story – permanence by recording it in a set of memoirs. His son, who seems to have the whole story memorized, will pass it on to Johnnie Carr Sr.’s grandchildren (he has two) and great-grandchildren (one so far).