



Portrait of A Former Trooper

By Tammy Poole

Delegate Bill Carrico is proud to represent Virginians and Virginia's Finest in the General Assembly

FRIES -- Bill Carrico remembers lying on his back strapped in his seat, looking up at the ceiling of his patrol car. He heard the dispatchers saying that a trooper had been injured in an accident.

"I thought that one of my co-workers had been hurt," he said, shaking his head at the memory. "Then I realized it was me!"

Carrico's cruiser had been struck from behind while stopped for a turning vehicle.

"I was on my way to a call and the last thing I remember is waiting for the car in front of me to turn into the high school parking lot."

The woman who struck his car had not even slowed down as she plowed into the rear of his vehicle. The driver's seat was knocked askew and Carrico was sitting almost in the rear of the vehicle after the impact.

He got out of the vehicle with assistance from several onlookers and seemed to be shaken though not severely injured. He was sore for a few days, but the doctor said he could go back to work.

The accident happened July 28, 1998.

"I was on my way to court that



Trooper Carrico poses by his VSP cruiser.

Opposite: Bill Carrico, his wife Paula, and their son and daughter.

morning. I had received a call to a hit and run accident that I had previously worked. Someone hauling a house trailer had run it into a homeowner's fence and a guard rail and then unhooked the trailer and abandoned it."

Someone was attempting to move the abandoned mobile home.

"I was en route to the scene."

Ironically, the call was a false alarm. The movers in question were the high-

way department moving the trailer out of the roadway.

The woman who struck his vehicle did not even slow down as she knocked his car approximately 2 feet into the air.

"I got out and slowly started moving around."

He was taken to the area hospital for observation. X-rays revealed nothing. However, the doctor felt that he



Trooper Carrico in the VSP Color Guard, on the right.

may have separated his shoulder but it had gone back into place. He had pain in both his shoulder and back. He was out of work for two weeks. He returned to work, went through an in-service school and performed his routine duties for several months after the accident.

Accustomed to being able to do most anything physical, Carrico began experiencing unfamiliar symptoms. As the months passed, it became obvious that something was very wrong. The 36-year-old trooper, a strapping, 6'4 athlete, was having problems with weakness in his legs. It eventually became so bad that, in December, he had to literally lift his right leg to get it in and out of the patrol car.

Answering calls or pulling people over became a chore because of the pain he was in.

"I didn't want them to know I was in pain. I would lie in bed and couldn't rest without being in pain. I couldn't sit for any period of time without pain ... My sergeant questioned my job per-

formance because I wasn't able to do much work."

Carrico went back to the doctor for a more in-depth look at his old injuries.

"He checked my reflexes on my right leg. There was nothing there. ... I hadn't had an MRI because the thought of being enclosed in that small space bothered me."

He was sent to a facility that had the capability to perform a more open MRI exam. The results revealed severe back injuries, including a ruptured lumbar disc and a ruptured thoracic disc, which had displaced the lower section of his spinal cord. The spinal cord had moved between the vertebrae in his back.

If he had done something as simple as move the wrong way, there was a distinct possibility he could have been paralyzed during the months between his accident and his diagnosis.

"When I think of how many times I had unknowingly risked being paralyzed, it scares me."

Carrico went to the hospital in

Bristol to see Dr. Jim Brasfield, a neurosurgeon.

"To me, Jim is the best neurosurgeon in the world. He examined me and said the impact had blown the lumbar disc out and damaged the sciatic nerve."

He was sent to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville for a second opinion. Dr. Shaffrey agreed with the diagnosis and recommended surgery.

"I decided to go with Dr. Brasfield. After careful consideration of the injuries, he decided to do my lumbar disc surgery first."

Carrico was scared, both because of the surgery and for his future.

"I was in my prime and had one child -- with another on the way. There was a 40 percent chance I would be paralyzed even with the surgery. However, if I didn't do it, there was much more of a possibility I would be paralyzed."

He felt much less pain after the first surgery so he decided to postpone the other surgery for a few months. However, the thought of permanent

Both Bill and Paula said they do not think the Department realized the seriousness of his accident until much later.



Carrico showing his scars after surgery.

paralysis was always in the back of his mind.

He watched what he did and moved cautiously. He took good care of himself. But he wanted to return to work and surgery was the only way that could happen. Ultimately he decided to go through with it. The second surgery was performed in September 1999.

The surgery went well; however, because his lungs were large and his throat was rather small in comparison, there were problems with his breathing. His throat swelled, and he was in a coma. He was comatose for two days, according to his wife, Paula.

"It was an awful time in our lives," she said.

Both Bill and Paula said they do not think the Department realized the seriousness of his accident until much later. The fact that it was a delayed reaction and occurred several months after the accident is probably what made it not seem so serious to everyone, she said. Co-workers and friends in the Department later told them they did not know that he had been injured or forced to take early retirement because of his injuries, he said.

After the second surgery, Carrico said he wanted to return to work but the Department would not let him.

"Here I was, a highly trained state trooper with 15 years' service. I had been certified by the Department of Criminal Justice as a general instruc-

tor with numerous specialties including firearms and radar. I also had taught at the state police academy as well as local academies. I asked them to let me stay on the job by instructing or something else, but they refused. I was told I would not be able to have the powers of arrest so they couldn't use me."

He could only return to work if he was at 100 percent capability physically.

While recuperating from the second surgery, Carrico received a letter from the Department asking for a definite date that he would return to work.

"Here I was, wearing a body brace from my neck to my waist and recuperating from two surgeries and still had sick leave available so I was surprised that they wanted me to have an actual date that I was supposed to be well."

His son was 9 and his daughter was 9 months old. Paula was not working, and the disability pay left them struggling to make ends meet.

Now worried about his job, Carrico told his surgeon that he had to take a physical exertion exam from Workman's Comp or risk being terminated. His doctor would not release him to take the test so soon after surgery in case he wasn't completely healed.

He received another letter from the Department informing him that he would be terminated within a couple of weeks if he did not return to work by that date.

"So I told my doctor that I had to

take the test because I did not want to lose my job."

Reluctantly the doctor said he could try to take the test.

Carrico took the test and, based on the results, was declared disabled on June 29, 2000. His letter of termination from the Department, dated July 7, 2000, states that he was terminated effective July 1. Carrico appealed the decision and requested to be retired. He then received a second letter listing him as having resigned, which he had not asked for. Upon third request at the end of July, the Department changed his status from resigning to retiring due to disability. He was reinstated at the end of July and retired effective July 1, 2000.

That date also happens to be the date that the legislature passed a law that law enforcement officers injured in the line of duty will have their insurance paid for by the state as part of their benefits.

Carrico was saddened by the results of the tests, but relieved that he wouldn't have to pay for his health insurance out of pocket since disability benefits -- 66 2/3 of his salary -- were lower than his salary.

He soon found out that he did not qualify for the new benefit.

I was told that I was declared disabled the day before the law took effect."

At first, Carrico said he was bitter. He had lost his identity, his career, his very livelihood. He was still a young man and, in his heart, a member of Virginia's Finest.

As a member of Virginia's legislature, Delegate Carrico, R-Grayson, said he thinks it is wrong that troopers who have given their all and are injured on the job are not allowed to stay with the Department after they have been injured in the line of duty.

It is not an efficient way to operate, he said. There should be some way to allow them to continue working for the state police if possible.

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Though being a state trooper was his dream, it was not his initial choice for a career.



Delegate Carrico with Leslie Cosslett, widow of Trooper C. Mark Cosslett, who died in the line of duty.

Carrico majored in engineering at Highland Community College and was a draftsman. He enjoyed drafting. He drew parts of machinery and equipment for mining tools.

Drafting was a calm job requiring close concentration. He saved his rowdiness for the weekends.

"I was always getting in trouble of one sort or another so I finally decided I might as well get on the right side of the law," he said, jokingly.

He also was interested in becoming a game warden and put in applications for both positions. The Game Commission was not hiring, but the Department of State Police was.

"They called me in 1984 to do all my testing."

Due to their efforts to increase the number of minorities and women, Carrico was not hired immediately.

One day, an investigator showed

up and began conducting a background investigation. Carrico was hired on March 16, 1985 at age 22.

Because of his meticulous drawing skills from drafting, Carrico's reports and accident diagrams were very popular, he said. "Everybody loved my printing because they could read what I had written."

He was the first ever probate in Patrick County. His FTO was T.J. Meade. He graduated from the 75th Basic Academy and was assigned to King George County.

"It was a great place to work."

He and Paula met in 1985 and married two years later. Their son, Willie, was born in 1990.

Carrico said he enjoyed working in King George. It is a small county and a trooper could answer a call from anywhere within 30 minutes. Looking back at his

time there, Carrico said he feels he probably suffered undiagnosed depression due to the amount of traffic fatalities he worked.

"I went to so many traffic fatalities that my co-workers began calling me

the Grim Reaper," he said. Of the accidents he worked, 28 resulted in fatalities in a 10-year-period. "It seemed like every time I went to the scene of an accident, there was a fatality."

Not all the times there were sad, however. He laughs about the time he and another trooper were having dinner at his house in King George. They heard a report of a police chase involving a stolen vehicle.

"That house had a rather long driveway. As we listened to the chase on the radio, we realized they were headed in our direction. We went out to our patrol vehicles to assist with the chase and suddenly here came the stolen vehicle into my driveway. Boy, was he surprised to find two state police cars at the end of the drive. He immediately backed out of the driveway and got away, but we found him not long afterwards."

Though King George and Grayson counties are both somewhat rural in nature, that's about the only trait they share. Both counties have excellent police and sheriff departments, Carrico said.

"I've always felt that we're out to accomplish the same goal, no matter what uniform you wear. I really enjoyed working with members of other law enforcement agencies when I was a trooper."

The Carricos moved to Grayson County in 1994. "Here, it could take up to 90 minutes just to get from one end



With Virginia Attorney General Jerry Kilgore (right).

of the county to the other. ... All my family is from this area and Paula's family moved here to be close to us."

He laughed while recalling the time he was off duty and came upon a brawl. There were no troopers or other members of law enforcement at the scene so he stopped to see if he could intervene. He ended up tussling with a rather large, irate individual. They were trading punches as he repeatedly told the man he was a state trooper. Obviously the man did not believe him as the fight continued. Finally, exasperated, Carrico held up his wrist upon which he wore a Virginia State Police Association wristwatch.

"See this watch?" he asked, pointing at the badge on the face. "This proves that I'm a state trooper."

The man looked at the watch and stopped fighting immediately. He also began apologizing profusely and calling him "Mr. Carrico."

When the state trooper on duty arrived, the man went over to him and also apologized.

"Sir, I'm sorry for hitting that other state trooper. He showed me his watch," he said to the bewildered trooper.

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When his career with the Virginia State Police ended, Carrico said he worked with the Grayson County School System as an in-school suspension supervisor while recuperating from his surgeries. He decided to run for office after an inspirational church service.

"The guest speaker at the church I attended said that someone in the congregation would be called upon to serve. I felt as though he were speaking directly to me."

That guest speaker became his pastor the same week that he was sworn into office.

Many times police officers feel they have a sixth sense that they use when they know a situation is bad and which choices to make based upon that feeling.

"Whether you know that or not, it's God's way of keeping you from being hurt or injured. I feel that it was God's

way that night of telling me that this was something I needed to do."

He went to a political meeting shortly thereafter and met a woman who had recently moved to the area. She said she was planning on running for the Republican primary in the upcoming delegate election for the 5th District. He mentioned to an acquaintance at the meeting that he wouldn't mind running for the delegate position himself.

"He asked me if I was serious. I told him I was."

The next thing he knew, he was on the ballot as the Republican candidate for the 5th District House of Delegates race.

Though he was a long shot — a newcomer who had no political experience and running against an incumbent — Carrico won the seat.

"No one appeared more surprised than Paula. After the results were in, she turned to me and said, 'You do know what you're doing, don't you?'"

His first call from a constituent came the morning after the election.

"I told the caller that I couldn't do much about his issue until I was officially sworn in."

Since taking office in 2002, Carrico has been in the spotlight several times.

A major proponent of the mandatory seatbelt bill, he changed his vote in the final moments after hearing from a number of members of his district who were opposed to "Big Brother" telling them how to live their life.

"I was elected to represent the people, and unless it's against my moral convictions, I have to vote according to the way they want me to represent them," he said. "Do I think seat belts save lives? I know they do. I can name names of some of those 28 fatalities I investigated who would be alive today



Delegate Carrico and President George W. Bush.

if they had been wearing their seat belt. Statistics show they save lives, but these people were more than a statistic. They were people I knew. And now they're dead."

Carrico said he was widely criticized for changing his vote. Some members of the media blasted him for being a turncoat and said he was responsible for the deaths that occurred afterward.

Then there was the infamous "White Tail" vote, legislation that would require an adult to accompany teenagers to a nudist camp.

"I voted against the bill because I didn't think teens should be allowed to go to the camp at all. Requiring an adult to accompany them would make it even worse because it would allow potential pedophiles to have inappropriate contact with minors."

After the vote, Del. Carrico said he was the only one voting against the bill.

"I had people telling me that the media would be making me out to be a pervert. I told them I didn't approve

Carrico is a man of strong convictions. A man who wants to do the right thing.

of it at all and that's why I voted against it. One gentleman questioned my vote, and I explained how I felt. He said he hadn't thought of it that way and now I made him feel like a pervert."

One of his proudest accomplishments is the sponsorship of HJR274. The Virginia Public Safety Foundation (VPSF) asked him to present HJR274 in this year's General Assembly. He told them he would be delighted to present the bill. The bill asked the General Assembly to create a study commission that would review benefits under the Line of Duty Act to Virginia's public safety officers who are permanently disabled in the line of duty due to a catastrophic injury.

The bill, which was rolled into HJR 34 sponsored by Del. Lacey Putney, was passed by the General Assembly on its first effort. A committee has been appointed to study the benefits, according to the Virginia Public Safety Foundation.

Randy Rollins, president of the Virginia Public Safety Foundation and former Virginia secretary of public safety, said, "Delegate Carrico was the critical factor in getting the General Assembly to authorize this important study. As patron of the original resolution, Delegate Carrico provided his personal experience as an officer injured in the line of duty and his leadership as an elected official to guide this initiative to successful completion."

Lou Ann Ladin, executive director of VPSF, said the organization had discussed ways they could be even more helpful to the public safety community.

"We looked at our mission and discussed the different branches of pub-

lic safety. We talked with state police, firefighters, EMS personnel, etc. They were all concerned about the gap in benefits for officers who had been severely injured in the line of duty."

Virginia State Trooper Gary Horner, shot six times by an assailant at a New Kent rest stop off Interstate 64, is one of those who could be affected by the bill.

Ladin said the bill also could affect a deputy in Tazewell who was injured when a suspect rammed his vehicle into the deputy and broke both his legs.

"He is going to be disabled for quite some time."

Ladin also praised Del. Carrico for his work on the bill.

"He was extremely helpful. It's just incredible that it passed on the first time."

Carrico is a man of strong convictions. A man who wants to do the right thing. As a former state trooper, he is accustomed to being loved by some while hated by others. He stands up for what he believes in and is not afraid to speak his mind.

When he ran against the incumbent, few people thought he had a chance of winning. He even said he understood when the Virginia State Police Association gave money to his opponent's campaign.

"The day the Association gave my opponent a donation was around the time I sent in my VSPA dues. I told Ed Haith that I didn't mind the fact that they gave money to my opponent so much as the fact that my dues were going toward his campaign. That hurt!"

Two years later, Carrico is one of VSPA's most beloved delegates.

VSPA Executive Director Wayne Huggins said, "Trooper Carrico was an outstanding trooper and Del. Carrico will be an even more outstanding legislator. Having him in the Legislature with an intimate knowledge of the Department and issues of importance to the troopers will prove to be invaluable to the VSPA in the years to come."

Though he is no longer a member of the Virginia State Police, he is still one of "Virginia's Finest." □