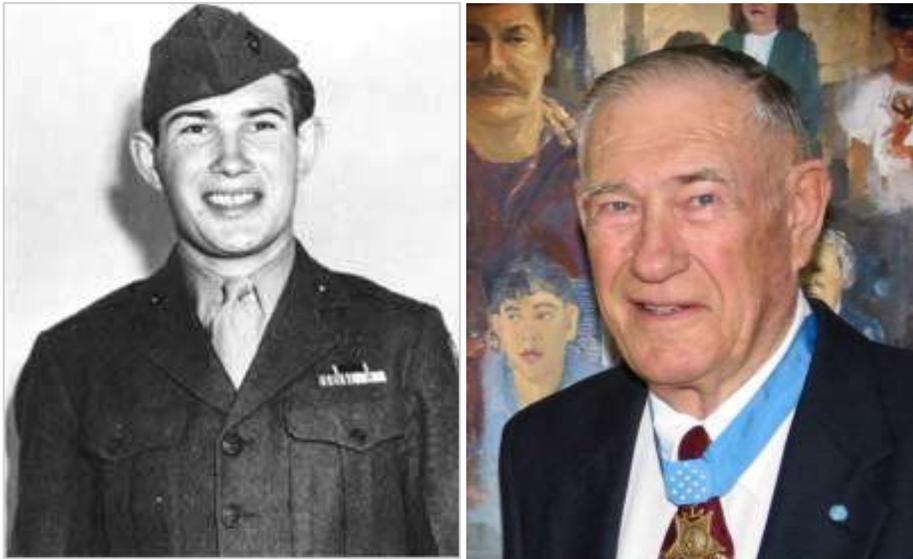


## Richard K. Sorenson (1924 – 2004)

Compiled by Kathy Huston, Lake Minnetonka DAR



**BIRTH:** 28 August 1924 Anoka, Hennepin County, Minnesota

**ENTERED SERVICE:** 13 December 1942 at Anoka, Minnesota

**BRANCH:** MARINES

**CONFLICT:** WWII

**DEATH:** 9 October 2004

### Early Years

A native of Anoka, Minnesota, Richard Keith “Rick” Sorenson was born the son of a WWI Navy veteran, Carl Siren Sorenson and his wife, Virginia A. Mox, on 28 August 1924. Hailing from a family of Norwegian immigrants, his grandfather Nels was the only child in his family to be born in America, in 1859.<sup>1</sup> On his mother’s side, his grandparents listed their birthplaces as “Poland Russian” and “Poland Germany” on the 1920 US Census for Duluth, Minnesota, having been naturalized in the 1880s.<sup>2</sup> Sorenson’s father was a machinist for the Buick Corporation and the family lived for a time in Flint, MI.<sup>3</sup> They returned to Anoka, where he graduated from Anoka High School in 1942.<sup>4</sup>

Upon hearing the news of Pearl Harbor with his family on the radio as a 17 year-old, he had gone to the Navy recruiting station the next day, even completing the papers, but his parents wouldn’t sign. He enlisted the following fall, after football season, at eighteen.<sup>4,5,6</sup> When he traveled to San Diego for basic training, it not only was his first trip away from home, but his first time on a train.<sup>6</sup>

### The War Years

Sorenson was not only awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor, but also a Purple Heart. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in December of 1942 and, in 1943, joined Company M, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 24<sup>th</sup> Marines at Camp Pendleton. Early in 1944 he departed for combat duty in WWII’s Pacific theatre.<sup>7</sup>

He earned the Medal of Honor for his heroism during the Marine landing at Namur, Kwajalein on the night of February 1, 1944 when, as a 19 year-old private, he threw himself on an exploding Japanese grenade in order to save the lives of five fellow marines.<sup>8</sup> He was severely injured, with fragments of the grenade piercing his thighs, hip, and right arm.<sup>9</sup> At the time, he was not expected to survive; in fact, as he was being evacuated, one of his stretcher bearers was killed by a Japanese sniper. He was removed to Hawaii and underwent six surgeries in nine months.<sup>10</sup>

He was awarded his medal by Major General Joseph C. Fegan, then commanding officer of the Department of the Pacific, while in the U.S. Naval Hospital in Seattle, Washington on 19 July 1944, "in front of all the other applauding patients, doctors and nurses."<sup>10</sup> Sorenson's citation reads:

*"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving with an assault battalion attached to the 4th Marine Division during the battle of Namur Island, Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands, on 1-2 February 1944. Putting up a brave defense against a particularly violent counterattack by the enemy during invasion operations, Pvt. Sorenson and 5 other marines occupying a shellhole were endangered by a Japanese grenade thrown into their midst. Unhesitatingly, and with complete disregard for his own safety, Pvt. Sorenson hurled himself upon the deadly weapon, heroically taking the full impact of the explosion. As a result of his gallant action, he was severely wounded, but the lives of his comrades were saved. His great personal valor and exceptional spirit of self-sacrifice in the face of almost certain death were in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service."*<sup>11</sup>

After his recovery, Sorenson went on to serve in the Marine Corps. He was assigned to the Marine Air Detachment at the Naval Air Station at Minneapolis, Minnesota and promoted to Corporal. The following month, he was ordered to the headquarters of the Central Recruiting Division in Chicago, Illinois and was promoted to Sergeant. Remaining on recruiting duty, he was ordered to the Midwestern Recruiting Division in St. Louis, Missouri, with additional duty at Fargo, North Dakota. Receiving orders to Great Lakes, Illinois, he remained there until honorably discharged in February 1946.<sup>12</sup>

Following his discharge, he went to work as a contract representative with the Veteran's Administration in Minneapolis. He studied business at St. John's University at Collegeville, Minnesota in 1948.<sup>13</sup> While attending college, he met his wife and lifelong companion of 55 years, Mildred Snow, on a blind date.<sup>14</sup> They were married on 26 November 1949.

In 1950 Sorenson was recalled to active duty during the Korean War, receiving orders to the Marine Corps Recruiting Station in Minneapolis. While at the station, he was promoted to Staff Sergeant in May 1951 and to Master Sergeant in June 1953. In October 1953, Sorenson was appointed a Second Lieutenant and reported for training at the Basic School at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia. In April 1954, he was assigned as the Assistant Supply Officer of the Seventh Engineer Battalion at Camp Pendleton and was promoted to First Lieutenant in the fall. Early the next year, he joined the Second Replacement Battalion and was ordered overseas to Okinawa, Japan with the Third Engineer Battalion, Third Marine Division.<sup>15</sup>

In November 1955, he returned to the United States, resigned his commission, and resumed civilian life.

### **Post-War Years**

Sorenson returned to the Veterans Administration until 1957, served as an insurance underwriter for the next decade, and then returned once again to the V.A. and retired as Director of Veterans Affairs for the state of Nevada and nine counties of California in 1985. He remained active in his community in public service.<sup>16</sup>

He and Mildred went on to raise a family five children, three sons and two daughters, Robert, Wendy, Debbie, James and Thomas.

When interviewed by the Anoka Historical Society in 1991, Sorenson was asked if he had any words of wisdom to share. He said: "Well, I think that really what we have to do in future generations, we have to be concerned about our freedom. We won our freedom in just one generation, and in one generation, we could lose it. That freedom is a very dear and precious thing, and I really don't think people understand how valuable it is until they lose it."<sup>17</sup> He is one of Anoka's WWII heroes for whom a park in the city is dedicated.

He died suddenly on 9 October, 2004 in Reno, Nevada, where he had lived since 1978.<sup>18</sup> His widow still resides in Reno, as do many members of his family.

### **Gravestone**

Richard K. Sorenson was buried with full military honors at Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>19</sup> His father and mother are also buried at Fort Snelling.



## **Documentation**

<sup>1</sup> Findagrave.com Memorial for Nels Christian Sorenson-Lah, online at <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=133431126>

<sup>2</sup> 1920 USC for Duluth, St. Louis, MN District 0106, Frank Mox, p 18 A-B, line 48-55; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>3</sup> 1930 USC for Flint, Genesee, MI District 14, Carl Sorenson, p 12 –A, line 1-5; online at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>4</sup> Anoka Hennepin, Minnesota School District, online at <http://anokahennepin.schoolwires.net/cms/lib08/MN01909485/Centricity/Domain/2198//2014%20Bios/Richard%20Sorenson%20Bio.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Nick Del Calzo and Peter Collier, *Medal of Honor: Portraits of Valor Beyond the Call of Duty; Taking the Impact: Richard K. Sorenson*, online at [http://www.military.com/NewContent/0,13190,MoH\\_Richard\\_Sorenson,00.html](http://www.military.com/NewContent/0,13190,MoH_Richard_Sorenson,00.html)

<sup>6</sup> Anoka County Historical Society Interview with Richard K. Sorenson, conducted by Pat Schwabik May 28, 1991, found online at [http://anokacountyhistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/10/RickSorenson\\_Transcript.pdf](http://anokacountyhistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/10/RickSorenson_Transcript.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Naval History and Heritage Command Website, online at <http://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-people/s/sorenson-richard-k.html>

<sup>8</sup> Captain John C. Chapin, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve (Ret.), “Breaking the Outer Ring: Marine Landings in the Marshall Islands”, *Marines in World War II Commemorative Series*, p. 15, online at [https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/wapa/extContent/usmc/pcn-190-003124-00/sec4.htm](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/wapa/extContent/usmc/pcn-190-003124-00/sec4.htm)

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_K.\\_Sorenson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_K._Sorenson)

<sup>10</sup> Nick Del Calzo and Peter Collier, *Medal of Honor: Portraits of Valor Beyond the Call of Duty*, Published in collaboration with the Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation by Artisan/Workman Publishing Co., Inc., New York, New York, 2003; p. 242-243

<sup>11</sup> "Pvt Richard K. Sorenson, Medal of Honor, 1944, 4th MarDiv, Namur Island, Kwajalein Atoll [Medal of Honor citation]". *Marines Awarded the Medal of Honor*. United States Marine Corps. Archived from the original on 2007-02-20; found online at <http://www.usmc.mil/moh.nsf/000003c919889c0385255f980058f5b6/0000033ba9f47a7385255fa60050434c?OpenDocument>

<sup>12</sup> Naval History and Heritage Command Website, online at <http://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/us-people/s/sorenson-richard-k.html>

<sup>13</sup> AR15, Home of the Black Rifle, Obituary of Richard K. Sorenson, online at <http://www.ar15.com/archive/topic.html?b=1&f=5&t=284283>

<sup>14</sup> Anoka County Historical Society Interview with Richard K. Sorenson, conducted by Pat Schwabik May 28, 1991, found online at [http://anokacountyhistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/10/RickSorenson\\_Transcript.pdf](http://anokacountyhistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/10/RickSorenson_Transcript.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> The Marine Corps Medal of Honor Recipients, U.S. Marines online at  
<http://www.marinemedals.com/sorensonrichard.htm>

<sup>16</sup> AR15, Home of the Black Rifle, Obituary of Richard K. Sorenson, online at  
<http://www.ar15.com/archive/topic.html?b=1&f=5&t=284283>

<sup>17</sup> Anoka County Historical Society Interview with Richard K. Sorenson, conducted by Pat Schwabik May 28, 1991, found online at  
[http://anokacountyhistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/10/RickSorenson\\_Transcript.pdf](http://anokacountyhistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/10/RickSorenson_Transcript.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> AR15, Home of the Black Rifle, Obituary of Richard K. Sorenson, online at  
<http://www.ar15.com/archive/topic.html?b=1&f=5&t=284283>

<sup>19</sup> From Home of the Heroes:  
[http://www.homeofheroes.com/news/archives/2004/1014\\_sorenson\\_obit.html](http://www.homeofheroes.com/news/archives/2004/1014_sorenson_obit.html)

Bio Photos:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_K.\\_Sorenson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_K._Sorenson)

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<http://anokahennepin.schoolwires.net/cms/lib08/MN01909485/Centricity/Domain/2198//2014%20Bios/Richard%20Sorenson%20Bio.pdf>

Gravestone Photo courtesy of Christina, findagrave.com Contributor

<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=9595235&PIpi=138818099>