

FRIENDLY FIRE

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Mickey Hurley's Story as told to Robert Porter Lynch

Our house was just a simple fisherman's shack, fixed up a bit so me, my mother, and two sisters me could live in it. The stove in the kitchen kept us warm in the winter when it got real cold.

Mom and I didn't really get along, I wished she'd just buzz off and leave me alone. She tried to straighten me out, but I reckoned since there wasn't anything wrong with me, I didn't have to pay any attention. We'd battle and none of us ever won. Finally I guess she just gave up on me.

Dad left years ago – he was a real prissy snot – lace curtain Irish from Boston. He was the kinda guy, if he saw a ditch digger, he'd walk on the other side of the street.

Even though mom was a teacher, I wasn't much of a scholar. School was just like prison. The only subject I excelled in was gym, that's 'cuz it got my attention. The books never seemed real to me, not like a tree or a bird or a bug. For me, nature was where I found the real things in life. In class I'd sit by the window gazing out hearing the call of the birds no one else heard. Seemed they had real freedom; something government and religion and schooling seemed to be taking away.

Always had a real yearning for adventure – not the kind that gets you in trouble or hurts other folks, mind you, that's just being mean. I'm talking about clean fun, like riding a roller-coaster in life.

I remember being just 'bout twelve when I was down by the blacksmith shop, run by old man Colburn. He had big bushy eyebrows that seemed like they always needed brushing. He was real sweaty, with big hands like he was wearing an old catcher's mitt.

I was lightnin' fast and 'bout as nimble as the chimpanzee or one of those trapeze guys you'd see in the circus. I shinnied up the downspout at the back of his building and climbed up the roof. Then I took a few loose bricks off of the top of the chimney and started dropping 'em down the into his fire. You should've seen them sparks fly. Colburn was fuming like a volcano. He came roaring outa the shop yelling and swearing up a storm. When he spotted me on the roof, I ran down the other side, jumped down into the back alley, and started running fast as I could. Then a police officer saw me and pulled up his car on the other side of a ditch from where I was standin'.

He said: "Hey kid, come on over here!" trying to coax me into giving up. But I just stood there and stared at him and smiled a sheepish grin. He started to cross the ditch and climbed up near where I was standin,' still thinking he was gonna get me.

Then just when he said: "Now I gottcha! Ya little bast'd" and reached out to grab me, I took off faster than a speedin' bullet. I just loved it when people said: "Now I gottcha! Ya little bast'd" and then I fooled 'em, leaving 'em in a cloud of dust.

He started chasing me, but I was a lot faster. I'd look over my shoulder and see how close he was. If I was leaving him too far behind, I'd slow down, just enough to let him think he was gonna get me, then I'd take off in a flash. Hate to think how frustrated he musta been.

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Climbing things was great sport; I've never had a fear of heights. Once I even thought of being a steeplejack. I'd climb up trees, pipes, even walls. One day I was climbing up the side of this brick building, getting my fingers into the joints between the bricks when I got to the third story where the roof juts out. I realized I couldn't let go with one hand and grab the roof, and couldn't climb down. Must've hung there for ten minutes realizing what an awful predicament I was in. Fortunately for me, there was a fire escape under me but it was about five feet away. I let go with both hands and made a gentle leap and landed safely. Boy, that was close. I realized then if I was to love adventure, I'd better be careful and think of the escape route first.

How I loved fishing and swimming in the summer, and skating in the winter when they were cutting ice in the ice-house. There was a big beautiful lake with a beach next to my back ya'd. At night, when mom thought I was asleep, I'd sneak out through the window and prowl the woods listening to the frogs. There must've been fifty of them, chirping like a symphony, each with a different sound. I really thought they were singing to me. The lake had a pulse, a real heartbeat.

In the morning, as the sun came up, the sandpipars would gather on the shore near my bedroom window. They'd line up like little soldiers and start to march from my end of the beach to the far end, chirping along, sounding like the tinkle of little bells -- it was so delicate. They'd always march forward, never back, always forward, then they'd take off in flight. I wished I could've had wings myself.

The most vivid dream I had at that age was always the same: I'd jump higher and farther each time, until I was up in the air swimming. I'd look down at the farm houses and barns and fields. Then I'd float gently down to earth.

When school was out I'd be down at the beach on the lake. I'd find some bigger guys in high school trying to score with the girls. I'd sneak up on 'em 'nd throw some sand or make a funny face or call 'em a sissy -- just to get 'em worked up. Then the fun would begin. They'd blast out of the sand like a rocket, chasing me to show them girls just what big shots they were. Me and my buddy had rigged a birch tree that was real flexible. I'd go running up the tree 'til it would start to bend right to the ground. When the big guys got close to my tail -- "Now I've gottcha, ya little basta'd" -- I'd jump off and the tree would whip back throwing them in the air. Then they'd really come after me.

Sometimes they catch me and give me a beating -- not real bad, just enough to send me a message. One summer I did so many pranks I went 'round with a black eye from May to Septembah.

Norman was my best friend growing up. He was scrawny and a real chicken. Not much like me. But he was a real good guy. The tough guys'd always pick him on, so I was his protector. When I was around, no one bothered him; I made sure of that. I was never afraid of fighting, it didn't seem dangerous to me, it was more like an adventure.

When we needed money, Norman and I would go over to the fence at the beach. Guys would wear their bathing suits under they trousers to the beach. When they draped their pants over the fence, coins would fall outa their pockets into the grass.

Grinning with our treasure, we'd go to the candy store. I liked coconut candy; and Norman liked chocolate. But he always bought half chocolate and half coconut. He'd give me the coconut, but I don't remember ever giving him any of my candy. He was a true friend.

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Norman and I had only one fight. Can't remember what it was about. I whacked him one, and made him cry, but I didn't mean to hurt him. I started fooling 'round to make him laugh. Showed him my belly button and said: "look where you shot me!" He laughed and we were buddies again.

When I was old enough to drive, I got a motorcycle, a Harley Davidson. It was surplus from the war. I couldn't wait to get out of work to jump on that machine. There was nothing to compare to riding full throttle down a windy country road with the wind blasting through my hair and the pounding of potholes left over from a rough New England winter. I'd love to take a curve so fast that I'd be on the edge of being out of control. I wasn't crazy, just wanted to push myself to the limit.

While I liked girls, they never seemed to care too much for me. Didn't know why, 'cuz I thought they always liked my funny stories and my clowning round. I guess they didn't see me as very romantic, 'specially when I did the Donald Duck imitation.

That summer I was walking along the beach and I saw six girls strolling along, talking and carrying on. One of them was hiding behind all the others. I saw her peaking out. We made eye-to-eye contact. She was so cute, with big, soft brown eyes that were tender as a warm summer sunset and seemed to belong to a Teddy Bear. I said to myself: "That's the girl I'm going to marry." I didn't even know her name yet. Don't know why it was such a strong feeling; guess it must be my love of nature.

Later I found out her name was Irene. When I realized she was a down-to-earth kind of girl, the type with no pretenses, we started dating. This is the kind of girl I wanted for a wife. I knew she'd be loyal and a best friend. She was old-fashioned, a real saint. She

was pretty too. Her mother was kind and caring, not like mine. Figured Irene came from good stock. So I proposed to her and to my surprise she accepted.

I used to work at the factory Saturdee mornings. This old guy was reading the paper. The headline, three inches tall in big black letters said: "GIs Getting Clobbered!" I knew right then those guys need help over there. I punched my card out, screwed downtown and joined the Army before I got home from work.

When I told Irene, she said knew I was going to do it, and wondered why I had waited 'til now. In the background the radio was playing the "Tennessee Waltz." I said, suppose I get shot, will you still love me and marry me?

"Of course."

"What if I get my feet shot off, and can't dance any more?"

"Oh ! I'd marry you if you got your head shot off!"

That puzzled me, but I couldn't help laughing at her weird sense of humor.

My buddies told me I'd have a pretty rough time at boot camp, with all that discipline and having a barbaric drill sergeant screaming in my face. So I was a bit surprised when I realized it really wasn't so bad. In fact, there were times I actually had a ball. The most fun was the obstacle course. Shooting a gun was just like huntin'.

We had a Master Drill Sergeant named Rex who'd just come back from the war. He was real tough, but that's 'cuz he wanted us to

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be like him. Secretly I wished he was my father. Growing up I could've used a guy like that.

Had clean-up duty in the mess hall one day. Me and thirteen other guys were supposed to swab down the decks. The rest of my crew decided to take off and have a smoke or go skylarkin,' leaving me to do all the dirty work. I hated it when my guys left me alone to do all the work. It was real hot and my uniform was drenched from head to foot.

Then this corporal came up to me and told me to swab the deck again. I took one look at him and I could tell he was a cocky little shit. One of those pompous assholes who liked to make life rough on buck privates. I told him I just swabbed the entire deck. "Just look at me!" I was just dripping in water. "Do I look like I've been screwing around?"

He bellowed at me: "Do it again, that's an order!" like he was trying to take over the whole goddam army.

That did it! "Go fuck yourself! I just did the goddam mess deck and the one on the other side of the building too! I did it alone, with no help! You take this bucket of soapy water and stick it up your ass!"

We were screaming at each other, having a real pissin' contest. I grabbed him by the neck and pinned him up against the wall when Sergeant Rex marched in.

"What the hell's going on here!" he roared.

I could've gotten busted for insubordination. He demanded to know if I wanted to be given a long-term assignment in the stockade. When I told him that all I wanted was to be treated fairly

and how the rest of the crew had deserted me, he toned down and told me to beat it.

But we had our fun times too. We were out on maneuvers, laying in the sand. I got hold of the canteen of the guy in front of me and filled it up with sand. What a riot when he went to take a drink! The funny part is: while I'm doing it to him, the guy in back of me's doing it to me! Everybody's roaring! Ya learn in life, that when no one's teasing ya, you're a jerk. I was always joking around.

Finally got orders. All of us new recruits were headed to the battlefield. They loaded us onto a rust-bucket of a ship. We were packed in like clothes on hanger in an overstuffed closet. The bunks were metal frames with just canvas stretched across, spaced 'bout eighteen inches above each other, five racks high. That canvas hadn't been replaced since the last war; it was so sagged it hung down into the rack below, creating just a tiny crawl space to slither into.

I was on the fourth bunk up, so it was a real fun climb in a rolling sea. I loved it. The guy above me was pretty heavy, his ass hung down onto my stomach. The view wasn't too good. So I spent most of the trip on deck, on the fantail, watching the ship's foamy wake slide by, leaving Irene so far behind.

T'was the middle of winter when we landed -- bitterly cold. They put us on a claptrap old freight train headed into the country to join the rest of our division.

I saw this old duffer on the train, had a scrunched-up face, like a mangy dog. Gruffy all the time, always needed a shave. Had false teeth, a real goddam Dogface. Tough as nails. Must have fought

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in every war there was. Only a corporal after all these years, but a real survivor.

I asked him: How come you been in the army so damned long and you're just a corporal?"

"I don't want the stripes, I'd just lose 'em too damned fast."

After a battle, Dogface would go through all the bodies -- GIS and the enemy -- stripping anything he could get his hands on -- money, watches, rings, all kinds of shit -- mail it home. He was a soldier of fortune and good at it.

While on the train we got our first rations, a big box to last maybe a week. We're throwing away the coffee, and the sugar and the cocoa. Couldn't use any of that shit -- we didn't have any hot water, so what good was it?

Here comes Dogface with his helmet and he's collecting everything in sight. He says to me: "You don't want that? I'll take it. What else you don't want?" He's throwing everything in boxes or stuffing it in his shirt. I'm looking at him and thinking this guy knows what he's doing!

I asked: "Will you watch over me?"

He says: "Come pick up all this shit with me. Pick up everything you can carry." I started picking up anything I could stuff in my shirt, and boy it came in handy later. I realized this was survival. He was a soldier of soldiers, not afraid of any goddam enemy. After that I clung onto him like a crab.

On the butt of his rifle, he carved "MARY" in the biggest letters he could make. He'd always be polishing and cleaning and

sighting down the barrel. Seems Mary was his girl friend. He was so in love with her and she in love with him. It was a bit strange, he didn't seem like the loving type.

After the train took us as far as it could go, we had a long march to the front lines. I had to take my turn carrying the machine gun. It was a heavy sonofabitch. We were supposed to take turns carrying it. I watched my feet pound over the frozen mud, with this Browning Automatic Rifle over my shoulder as I mumbled: "left-right, left-right, Irene-Irene, left-right" for hours. Finally we got to camp. The sergeant asked why I hadn't given the gun to one of the other privates to haul around. I hadn't noticed how heavy it was.

This camp was an eerie place. There were army tents in the village. I looked inside one of the village huts and saw a woman holding her baby -- frozen stiff -- just lying there. The ground was too cold to dig her a hole. Besides, nobody knew their names. I said nothing, just gawked.

Christ, it was cold. I went into a tent for some sleep. There was straw on the ground and a fire in a potbelly stove. Everyone was gathered around it. I decided to take my sleeping bag outside and find a sheltered place to get some rest, even though the winds were howling and the ground was rock-hard. In the middle of the night the wind blew the tent down, catching it on fire.

Next morning we marched out to the front lines. We were pinned down while our artillery just behind us was shooting over our heads. They'd shoot a barrage of three rounds -- Baboom! Baboom! Baboom! Every goddam time, 'bout every third round -- Whoosh -- would blow right above our heads. We'd grab our helmets, hunker down, and duck for cover. One piece of shrapnel, about two inches long missed my head by just a couple of inches.

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It got dangerous hanging around them bastards. Me and my buddies learned not to position ourselves underneath where they were shooting to get out of their line of fire.

When it was over, I looked at the date on the empty shells. Sure enough they were left over from the last war. For cripes-sake, no wonder we're losing so bad.

Someone stole Dogface's rifle. He caught up to me in the chow line and says: "Hey, you seen my rifle? Some sonofabitch stole it." He never found it, but if he did, he literally would've killed 'em with his bare hands. I don't know why someone would do that. He was a good guy. He got another rifle and carved "MARY" into the butt, letting everyone know that it meant death to take it.

Our Captain said we had to be on the alert, the enemy could attack any moment. But who'd ever think of fighting in this cold. Musta been twenty below. I went out on to the edge of the line that night just to see what was happenin.' Our lookout was asleep, bundled up just to keep from getting' frostbit. What if they attacked tonight? We'd all be over-run. What a sinking feeling. I volunteered to stand the night guard 'cuz I couldn't trust our own guys.

I knew the enemy was out there. Each night I'd count the stones and mounds on the other hill. One night there were thirteen, the next night fifteen. The enemy was like the wind, you could feel and hear 'em, but just not see 'em.

After a week of this, our Captain explained: "We're gonna attack in the morning. No more of this waiting. It's time to get tough and show 'em how good you boys are." He was tryin' to get us fired

up, but he didn't need to. We were all tired of standing 'round in the cold. Let's get on with it.

Sunrise. Our artillery's firing rapid rounds overhead. I'm right out front in the advanced guard. There's the enemy on the ridge. Somethings moving. Aim and fire. Don't think I hit anyone. More of our artillery coming directly overhead. Whoosh. I'm flying up in the air, spread eagled. I can't hear anything except that warm deep whooshing sound. There's a bright yellow flame at my feet, like I was standing in a furnace. Pretty high up. I'm looking down at the green helmets thinking they look the size of walnuts.

Landed, but don't feel any impact. Must really be out of it. Two fellahs are charging by towards the next hill. They come over and set me up. I'm dazed. Must be medics so I don't talk -- just stare blankly into space. Everything s going to be okay; I'm getting fixed already. They figure I'm dead. They take my bullet bandoleers, cartridge belt, canteen, then drop me and screw up the hill.

A couple of hours later I really wake up. Most of the battle's on the other side of the hill. There's one sonofabitch still shooting at me. Artillery's screaming over me. I'm clawing the dead grass, sliding down the hill. I smell the gunpowder.

I look at my legs. They're all twisted 'round. Tops of my boots are off. My toes are sticking out, snow white with little teeny holes in 'em. There's no blood: frostbite maybe.

See helmets about 300 feet away. Our guys. I holler for a medic. The more I cry out, the more this sonofabitch above me keeps shooting at me. Finally, a colored guy comes along and asks if I'm all right. I says to him: "Would you take my belt and put a

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tourniquet around my legs?" I'm not bleeding too bad so I think I'll be alright.

Now it's the enemy artillery coming in on me closer and closer. "What a shitty place to die!"

I see Dogface. He's picking up stuff from all the dead bodies. He kneels down over me as the next enemy artillery barrage comes in on us. He says: "Kid, I didn't know it was you. Quick, put your arms around my neck." He stands up, and my legs dangle, going "clippity clack." I can't feel them, but I hear the bones." I says: "Put me down." Dogface sees a medic with a stretcher. He puts me down, and they lay me out on the stretcher. Dogface and the medic on opposite ends heading back. Just then another enemy artillery barrage starts coming in on us. I hear whoosh, whoosh, whoosh as the shells tear through the air; then baboom, baboom, baboom they exploded close by. The last one hums in about 15 feet away. The earth's shakin'. Dogface and the medic just drop me hard. They hit the deck fast. We're not hurt.

When we got to the field hospital, I don't remember Dogface saying goodbye. Just a lot of blanks as they put me on morphine. All I remember him saying was: "Go to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington. Mary will make sure you're taken care of."

It was real cold. The field hospital is just a big tent behind the lines. I pulled the covers over my head to keep warm. A nurse came by and figured I was dead. She peaked under the blanket and I smiled and said: "Hi, I'm alive!" She was shocked, but relieved. We laughed together. It's the first time I'd laughed in quite a while. I felt safe.

When I woke up the next time, both legs were gone below the knees. Strangely, I wasn't surprised. They kept me drugged up on morphine; it felt like both my feet were in a tub of hot water.

A telegram was delivered to Irene telling her I was severely wounded in battle but alive. I wished they hadn't alarmed her, but there was nothing I could do to stop the message.

When she got it she cried. But she didn't know how badly I was hurt. She then pulled herself together. It was cold and raw outside. She put on her raincoat and boots to walk the long mile to my mom's house to tell her the sad news. Mom was peeling potatoes in the kitchen when Irene knocked on the back door. Mom said nothing; just kept peeling her potatoes. Irene didn't have much to say either and trudged back home. The rain was turning to snow.

Got put on a plane. As I looked out the window of that big bird a million thoughts flew through my mind. "Would Irene want me now that I'm a cripple?" "Could I ever ride my motorcycle?" "How will I ever climb stairs?" "Will the pain ever go away?" "Am I the same person?" "What will it feel like if I can't skate or ski again?" On and on with unanswerable questions.

Finally I wrote to Irene to tell her not to worry, my injuries were not as severe as they had thought, that I'd be okay.

It was one plane after another. I got a letter from Irene telling me not to worry, she was waiting for me. It gave me enough confidence to write again. This time I told her it was a foot injury and I'd have a limp.

Eventually I made it to Walter Reed Hospital. I wrote to Irene again, telling her she could come see me in a month. I got the courage to let her know I actually lost a foot.

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She wrote back. Everything was okay. She'd be down to see me as soon as I could receive visitors. She sent me a beautiful picture of her, which I placed on the table next to my bed for me and everyone else to see. Her brown eyes just glowed.

Dogface wrote to his girlfriend Mary and she came to see me after I'd been in the hospital for just a few days. She was a piece of work. Friendly. Everything Dogface bragged about. She asked me if Dogface (his real name was Bob Kent) was all right.

"He could go through an atomic blast and survive. Let me tell you how he feels about you." I told her about the story about her name being carved into his rifle butt and how, when Dogface's rifle was stolen, he would have killed the sonofabitch who defiled her name. She was delighted. One day she arrived with a package Dogface had sent. It was a couple of inches thick of real, brand-new money he'd got off the enemy.

Sent Irene another letter, knowing she'd be arrivin' in 'bout ten days. This time I thought I'd better tell her I'd lost both legs.

Ward Thirty-Three in Walter Reed was filled with real gentlemen. I felt honored to be part of 'em. We had more fun. We clowned around and joked and told stories. Each of us had lost something – an arm, a hand, both legs. But we kept each other's spirits up, despite the pain.

They wouldn't let us have much morphine, but let me tell you, this is when most of us really needed it. In the middle of the night someone would wake up screaming. There were nights when my feet were burning in fire for hours.

One day the kid in the bed next to me was looking real glum. He'd been shot in the mouth but only lost the tip of his tongue, so he

talked a little funny, with a bit of a lisp. I asked him what was the matter. He'd just got a "Dear John" letter.

I told him he was real lucky. "Her love is for you is very weak. You need a girl that knows what love is. Your girl only loved you for the tip of your tongue; and when you lost it, you lost her. Either that or you had one really great tongue for her to love it so much!" He laughed and seemed to be a lot better after that.

Once a week the debutants came to visit us in the hospital. They were really nice, even though they came from fine rich families. They'd make the rounds of the hospital, visiting each ward.

But they'd always come back to Ward Thirty-Three and stay with us 'til the end of the afternoon. We kept 'em happy. I think it was hard on 'em to see so many maimed soldiers. I'd tell 'em I fired only one shot on the battlefield and look what happened to me!

The guys in our ward would never talk about their condition, that was taboo. We just went about having a sense of humor. It was the best bunch of guys I ever knew. Spent nine months there – enough time to make me corporal.

Irene was scheduled to arrive the next day. I got a haircut to look as spiffy as I could. I cleaned the glass and polished the frame of her picture. Didn't sleep a wink that night.

When she entered the room the next afternoon, I took one look into her Teddy Bear eyes as she flashed me a big warm smile. She came beside the bed, and without saying a word gave me a hug only like a real mother could give.

*Based on a True Story of Private Vincent Hurley and his
Wife Irene, now married 52 years.*