

## 2 UNCLE WADE HOLE

We call him Uncle Mike, Wade, and even Michael Wade. Even better though, especially if you want something from him, is to address him as *Uncle Wade Hole*.

The person I am speaking about is my Uncle, Michael Wade Greenfield. A man born of a different era, I suppose that might be somewhat debatable (him being born I mean), but a man like no other I have ever known, and likely will never see again. The story that is about to be told here may not be suitable for all audiences and a PG-14 rating might be appropriate. So be forewarned, what you are going to read is a real “No Sh\*ter!”

The story begins, at least for me and my generation in the early 1960's. Although I have heard stories from before this time, I will only recount those that I actually know first-hand and believe me, they could fill an entire book by themselves. But the intent here is to highlight the most memorable and to give a general overview of this remarkable man, and the impact that he had on us.

To understand Uncle Mike, I guess a little explanation is in order. Uncle Mike is the third oldest of sixteen, just a couple of years younger than my mother, the second of the sixteen. My grandmother apparently was very fertile and spread her children out over a twenty-one year period that overlapped her daughter, my mother's child-bearing years. Consequently, I have several uncles within a few years of my age, we all grew up together and were in many ways more like brothers. And since grandma and grandpa's divorce a few years earlier, and moms recent divorce too, Uncle Mike was kinda like a father figure, and helped raise us. He assumed the role of family patriarch, a role he relished, without having to be asked.

In the mid-sixties he had recently completed his service in the US Army which had included at least one tour in Vietnam. Although he had left the service, when he returned home to Pontiac Michigan it was evident that the service hadn't entirely left him. Perhaps knowing that a family in turmoil needs disciplined leadership, he brought his Gung Ho and can do attitude with him. Taken together, brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews, it didn't matter, we were all drafted into Sergeant Wade Hole's Platoon.

## THE DUMP TRUCK

Forest Street was a typical two-lane city street ending at the foot of a railroad track that ran on an elevated earthen rail bed. It is two blocks long, and our house was situated in the last

block, fourth from last on the right. Grandma Laney, her youngest eight or ten children and Uncle Mike lived in the second from last on the left.

One sunny afternoon during summer break several of us were playing in the street, which because of the limited traffic was not unusual. The simultaneous sound of an approaching vehicle rumbling down our tiny street and a loud blast from an air horn scattered us in every direction. As we watched, a large old rust-red, green-boxed dump truck pulled to the curb. For a moment it just sat there idling, the driver obscured from view by both the height above us and the streaking on the windshield. Who could it be? we were thinking, and why did he stop here? the coal yard is at the end of the street. With the natural curiosity of youth, we approached the driver's door just as it creaked open. Seemingly in slow motion, the burly figure of Uncle Mike appeared on the running board. "What cha think of the truck guys?" he asked. Excitedly bouncing around him, we looked in awe at the now beautiful "new" mechanical marvel in front of us. "Wow! Uncle Mike is this really yours?" my brother asked. "Yeah it is," he said, "Ok guys, fall in along the curb!" Once assembled at the curbs edge, of course in order of height and close dressed right, he began. "Alright listen up, I just got this truck today but haven't had a chance to haul anything in it yet. Who wants a ride?" Of course we all shouted "I do, I do!" and we began scrambling toward the truck. As some of the older ones reached for the door on the passenger side, Uncle Mike said "Not up front, everybody rides in the back!"

"In the back?" I remember thinking, "how can we ride in the back?" Before anyone could ask out loud, Uncle Mike answered that question for us. Walking around to the back, he unhooked the chain used to hold the swinging tailgate in place while traveling down the road to the up position and secured it in place, locking it open. "Ok, everyone up," he declared.

Some of the older ones clawed their way in and extended hands to us while Uncle Mike gave us a boost up. Once situated along the sides in the back, Uncle Mike climbed behind the wheel and cranked her up. I still remember the puffs of black smoke from the straight-pipe exhaust which ran at the backside of the cab encircling us all, sort of like you'd hear about the people who rode the old wood-burning trains of the old west. It didn't bother us, it was just part of the experience.

Uncle Mike turned around at the end of the street and then chugged up the first block to Foster Street and turned left, taking us over toward Tregent and Cross Streets. Some of us younger ones had a hard time peering over the edge of the dump body, but we somehow managed to hold on. Along the way, neighbors out mowing their lawns or just enjoying normal outside activities would wave in response to our exuberant shouts from high atop. "Look at us, we're in a dump truck!" was a common greeting to those we passed. "Hey Uncle Mike, hit the air horn!" was another. Of course he was glad to accommodate. He must have blown the horn a dozen times during our ride. Another unique and interesting view was through the back of the open tailgate. It was almost like watching a film in reverse, with the figures on the sidewalks slowly shrinking from sight instead of increasing in size. It wasn't long before this view took on an entirely different perspective.

After perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes of cruising around the surrounding blocks of our neighborhood, Uncle Mike turned back onto Forest Street from Baldwin. Rolling steadily down the street, most of us were disappointed the ride was ending. Although the steel deck and sides of the dump body were pretty hot from the Sun beating down on them, kind of like the metal slides we used to play on at the playground, we would have ridden like that all day if we could have. Uncle Mike

started slowing as we approached our starting point but did not completely stop, instead rolling ahead at about 5 miles per hour. Suddenly we heard a heavy clunk of a sound and felt a bit of a vibration, and to our horror, the bed of the truck started to rise! “AHHH!” we were all screaming! “Stop Uncle Mike, what are you doing?!” We were all clinging to the sides holding on for dear life as the bed continued to rise. From inside the cab, Uncle Mike was laughing in his distinctive snorting kind of laugh, “I’ve got to test the dump bed part too,” I heard him laughingly say.

I’m not sure who was the first to lose their grip, but eventually someone did, and within a matter of seconds of each other we all came tumbling down the bed, out the back and ended up in a pile on the street, right in front of our house! I was somewhere about mid-way amongst that pile, my legs and arms tangled with those of one of my cousins. Uncle Mike emerged from the cab to inspect his “cargo” laughing a deep belly laugh now. “Well, it looks like it works ok,” he said.

His infectious laugh got us all laughing, hooting and hollering. It actually turned out to be a lot of fun. Most of us wanted to do it again, but knowing that you can never duplicate the initial surprise of the inaugural ride, he declined. That ended up being the only ride in the back of his dump truck. None of us got seriously hurt. Oh there may have been a few scrapes and such, but nothing that we wouldn’t have come home with anyway at the end of the day. We were all a rough and tumble bunch of kids. Uncle Mike inspected each minor injury though just to make sure, reminding each of us that he’d had on several occasions had worst injuries to an unmentionable part of his body. Saying that “I’ve had bigger scratches than that on my...” well you can fill in the blank.

## THE ROPE, THE TREE & THE BICYCLE

As mentioned above, Uncle Mike had assumed the role of family patriarch. Among the many responsibilities of this role of course included discipline when necessary. Considering the several of us around at the time, mostly boys, my memory is that someone needed some kind of discipline almost every day. Unfortunately, a lot of the time it was me. Not that I was a particularly troublesome kid, but like other boys I did have a mischievous side. I was also sometimes gullible and often fell prey to the pranks of my older Uncles. Pranks that inevitably found me on the firing line, and face to face with Uncle Mike, awaiting one of the three most unique disciplinary tactics ever devised.

Minor infractions were usually dealt with by a single knuckle rap to the side of your head. Not a hard blow, but enough to get your attention and mostly spontaneous in nature. This was most often administered during our weekly haircuts. We would be taken into an upstairs room of our house, which except for a small table holding clippers and a wooden barstool, was otherwise bare. The walls were painted white and there were no pictures or anything else on them. We would sit on the stool and told to stare at some invisible spot on the wall while Uncle Mike gave each of us boys a buzz-cut. Even though it didn't take long, I always found my eyes drifting, searching for the so-called spot. "Whap!" there it was, the "find the spot and hold your head still" reminder.

The next level of discipline was reserved for things such as telling a lie, or worse yet, telling on one of the other kids for some perceived breach of protocol. Loyalty was expected, and unless it was a matter of life and death, squealing on someone was not dismissed without consequence. This is not to say that if the person being squealed on did commit an offence they wouldn't be punished, quite the contrary, but so too was the

squealer. It didn't take but once or twice for me to learn this lesson, therefore I only received this tactic a couple of times.

It was in simple in nature, and very effective. I'm pretty sure that it was another one of those things that Uncle Mike had learned in the Army; at least that's what he said. In our backyard there were several trees, a couple of them large oaks. Uncle Mike had strung a rope, probably about one inch in diameter between two of these trees, and about five feet above the ground. Spaced along and tied to the span of this rope were other shorter pieces of clothesline rope, six in all as I remember, each one with a looped slip-knot at the end.

There was very little talk prior to assuming the position. Oh, did I forget to mention the position? The position was that the one being disciplined would be taken to the line, thumbs inserted through the loops and there suspended while the importance of correcting the behavior that resulted in being there in the first place was explained. It didn't take long, and the message was well received. I think that this is why I have double-jointed thumbs, a trait that helped me to win many thumb wrestling matches as a kid.

Graduating upward, the middle of the three disciplinary routines was probably the most often used, at least on me. It was good for straightening out the normal kind of things that kids, especially boys always get in trouble for. You know, unfair and unnecessary fighting, picking on the girls, and mouthing off to adults, particularly Uncle Mike. Like the other two previously mentioned, it was straightforward and mostly effective.

Among the trees in the backyard, there were some of course that are best described as medium-sized. About twenty or twenty-five feet tall and with branches in the six to eight inch diameter range. They were good climbing trees, and my

brother, cousins, younger uncles and I did in fact climb them often just for fun. It was different though when Uncle Mike told you to climb one.

Again, it was a very simple routine. You were ordered to climb the tree. Once at an appropriate level for the violation that had occurred, of course at his discretion, Uncle Mike would tell you to jump out of the tree. The idea was that you would jump and either sustain a minor injury, or at least a hard thumping on the ground, thereby receiving your just desserts. If the thumping wasn't hard enough, again at his discretion, you had to repeat the process, only this time climbing higher in the tree. Lord help you though if you tried to fake it!

Occasionally one of us would jump, fake a limp and thought that we were good to go. Uncle Mike generally saw through the attempted forgery though. Sometimes we forgot that another one of his Army tricks he had taught us was the Parachute Landing Fall, or PLF. It was a technique that upon landing, one would bend his knees slightly, tuck and roll, using his thigh, rump, back and shoulder to absorb the majority of the impact. We had all learned the lesson well, evidenced by the many times that we had to jump more than once.

On one occasion, while I don't recall what I had done to warrant the procedure, I found myself facing the prospect of having to climb and jump out of one of the largest of the medium-sized trees, the one we younger ones called "Conquistador." It wasn't a lot larger than the others, but noticeably so. As was not unusual from the other trees, the first attempt around the halfway mark just bought me a second attempt from higher up. As I sat wedged between the trunk and the last spreading of the branches closer to the top waiting for the order to jump, I got a sudden burst of belligerence. It turned out to be a sudden burst of stupidity! Let me explain a

little. I had pondered on the way up that I was being disciplined unfairly, that I didn't deserve it. And I was a little more scared than usual because Conquistador was taller than the other unnamed trees. I had figured that if I decided not to jump, what could he do about it? After all I thought, he's too big to climb up here and get me, right? Wrong! No sooner than I had uttered some kind of refusal, I don't recall my exact words now, I found myself flying through the air with an impending impact looming large, and soon. Thud! I slammed into the ground in nothing near the PLF position. You hear people sometimes say that things like that seem to occur in slow-motion, not for me. It all happened so quickly, and left me with a renewed respect for the agility of Sergeant Wade Hole. I didn't have to fake it that time!

The last and most severe of the three methods was reserved for serious defiant, disobedient and insubordinate actions. To coin a military phrase, conduct unbecoming. Again, I generally learned quickly, and in this particular case, very quickly! I was only subjected to this tactic once, and may have been the only one ever subjected to it. I just don't know for sure.

To repeat what I have said before, it was a straightforward and extremely effective approach. The simplicity was almost overwhelming. It involved an abandoned bicycle frame, dirt clods and a third element that I will reveal shortly. First let me tell you why I was subjected to it, and you might agree that perhaps I did deserve it.

On another typical summer afternoon, Uncle Mike and someone else were working on a car in our driveway, directly adjacent to the front porch, a couple of feet away. They had it jacked up in the front and were crawling all under and around it. At times like that, usually one or more of us boys were recruited to serve as gophers, fetching tools and bottles of beer from the Styrofoam cooler that was always close by. This time

my brother was picked. While this activity was occurring in the driveway another uncle, only a year older than me, and I were under the porch pretending to be in some kind of fort and we watched the action through the lattice strips unnoticed, except by my brother. Of course the repairs were undertaken with the usual utterances of curse words and derogatory remarks made against the designer of this particular model of car. In other words, they were having a hard time with whatever they were doing. The two of us were enjoying the fact that we went unseen.

The beers were being consumed pretty quickly and the empties were beginning to stack up along the edge of the driveway, between them and our concealed location. Soon the men shifted to the side of the car facing us, and as a result they were placing their active beer bottles on the ground right next to the porch, well within reach through the lattice. In what turned out to be another burst of stupidity, I decided to snag Uncle Mike's beer bottle through the lattice while his back was turned. Ah but this is where the real illogical part of my plan began. I didn't grab his beer to consume it; no I had a more nefarious plan. Perhaps it was mischievousness, I don't really know what I was thinking, but the end result will speak for itself and I think that you will agree that stupidity probably describes it best. As you know, young boys get excited about things pretty easily and the fact that we were eavesdropping like this had my kidneys and bladder working overtime. So once I saw that Uncle Mike's bottle was about half empty, I reached through the lattice, grabbed it, gave him a courtesy refill and put it back in place. My brother saw what I had done and wisely backed away several feet.

"Ugh!, what the \*&#\$ is that?" my uncle screamed while spitting away the awful contents of the bottle. "You little \*%^\@\$#!, I'm going to.." "Wait, it wasn't me!" my brother blurted out while backing still further away, "it was him!"

pointing to the lattice of the porch. Knowing that the situation had immediately gone from what I thought would be funny to one of extreme peril, I crawled through the dirt toward the exit on the other side of the porch with the skill of the best infantryman, but it was not enough to escape. Uncle Mike was there at the exit and I could tell that this would be a really bad time to attempt further evasion. I gave myself up and begged for mercy!

As you might imagine, my pleas fell mostly on deaf ears, well for the most part. I suppose that he was somewhat merciful in that he could have worked me over pretty good, but didn't. I don't know if this third tactic was something spontaneous or if he had already had it in mind but never used it before. Whatever the situation, it was the most effective.

Ok, back to the actual punishment. Once I had been captured, Uncle Mike marched me around to the backyard and told my brother to go get everybody else. I knew that this was going to be serious if he was gathering everyone together. Apparently I was going to be an example. Maybe he was going to make me climb one of the big trees and jump? Perhaps hang me on the line and then paddle me? I just didn't know, but I sure felt like a disgraced soldier waiting for the firing squad! I stood there motionless, caught by the collar in Uncle Mike's mighty grip.

A few minutes later, all the other boys arrived, a couple of the girls too. Uncle Mike assembled them in a line across the backyard behind the house and then made me tell them what I had done. The whole time dragging me up and down the line, I'm sure so that each of them could see the distraught in my eyes. "Alright," he said to me while giving a shove "go take a seat on that bicycle down there," pointing to the abandoned frame at the far end of the yard. "But Uncle Mike, that bike has a hornets nest in it!" I exclaimed. "GO!" he yelled. As I slowly made my way toward the frame, I remembered that the

hornets nest was the reason that it was still down there alone. Every time that someone would get close and try to move it, the hornets would swarm out and chase them away, sometimes inflicting a few stings along the way. I had personally never been stung, but I had a feeling that was about to change.

Once I reached the bike, I hesitated, but another yell from Uncle Mike made me cautiously throw my right leg over the saddle and gently lower my butt to the seat. I was trying to be as gentle as I could because the nest was on the underside of the seat. I sat there very still for what seemed like minutes, but was probably only a few seconds. “NOW, GRAB THE HANDLEBARS AND START PEDALING!” he bellowed. “Start pedaling?” I thought, on a frame that has no tires or even rims, just two sets of forks pushed into the ground! “DO IT!” he yelled again. By this time the hornets were stirring around a bit and starting to buzz near my face and bare arms, but none had stung me..yet. I did as I was told. I placed my feet on the pedals, my hands on the handlebars and slowly tried to start rotating the pedals. They were stuck! I guess sitting there had caused them to rust up and they didn’t want to move. “PEDAL!!” Uncle Mike yelled, “PEDAL!” “I’m trying,” I tearfully plead, “but there’re stuck Uncle Mike!” “YOU BETTER GET TO PEDALING!” was the only reply. I tried harder now, and they started to move. This also caused the frame to shake some and stirred up the hornets even more, they were getting mad. I received my first sting on the forearm. “OW” I cried, “I’m sorry Uncle Mike, I really am!” No reply. As I continued to pedal, I also continued to get stung. There’s one on the other arm, there’s one on the side of my face. “OW, OW, OW” I was crying. As if this were not enough, just then the bike frame started getting pelted with dirt clods that Uncle Mike was throwing from his position at the top of the yard. He was a good throw, probably a skill honed by throwing grenades in the Army. The more he threw, the madder the hornets got. I was getting stung so much now that I

think I was becoming immune to the pain. Now I was filled with a determination to just get through this ordeal. I concentrated by looking straight ahead, and I pedaled harder and faster. “ARRGH!” I repeated this over and over.

Finally after what again seemed to be a longer time than I know it really was, Uncle Mike yelled again, “OK, THAT’S ENOUGH, GET UP HERE.” “Did he say I could stop?” I wasn’t sure that I had heard him. “COME ON, YOU CAN STOP NOW” he repeated. Apparently I wasn’t responding to his orders to stop, for the next thing I knew, Uncle Mike was lifting me from the bike frame and carrying me running to the top of the yard, receiving several stings himself along the way.

He laid me on the ground and told someone to go get some water and damp cloths. I don’t remember everything that happened next, but I do remember laying there sobbing and repeating several times that I would never do anything like that again. I also remember Uncle Mike with a gentleness that I had never seen from him before, dabbing at my wounds with the cool damp cloth and saying, “You’ll be alright boy, you took it like a man.” “I’m damn proud of you.”

I don’t remember how many times I was stung that day, but I’m sure it was more than twenty. Yes they hurt for a few days, and I was covered in the pink lotion stuff while I recovered, but ever since bee stings just don’t seem to bother me much. I don’t like them, but they don’t really bother me either.

I also think that Uncle Mike gained a new found respect for me that day, as I did for him. Even though I was a kid and still got in trouble occasionally, it seemed that he treated me a little differently from that day forward. Over the years we have developed a deep and close relationship that endures to this day.

Oh by the way, once I recovered I marched right down to that old bicycle frame and destroyed the hornets nest single-handed. Sure I got a few more stings while doing so, but so what! I had already endured the best that they had. I ain't afraid of no stinking hornet!

## FROGMAN TRAINING

Growing up in Michigan, we were of course surrounded by many inland lakes, not to mention the Great Lakes themselves. I think that I've read somewhere that while in Michigan you're never more than a few miles from some body of water. I believe that. There seemed to be countless lakes within a short drive or bicycle ride. Some of my favorites growing up were Green Lake, Indian Lake, White Lake, Frog Lake, Elizabeth Lake, Long Lake, the unnamed lake that we once lived on, and of course, Stony Lake.

Most of the family lived within eight or ten miles of this last lake and it was one of our family favorites. I think that it had been a gravel pit at one time, as so many other lakes were in that part of the state. Being such, the water is deep, clear and cool. It sits at the bottom of a steep hill probably about one hundred yards from the parking area at the top to the sandy beach at the shoreline, which one reached via railroad tie steps. Scattered on flat spots to either side of the path throughout the descent were picnic tables with cast-iron grills. They were perfect little retreats for small family gatherings that allowed easy access to the lake while preserving some privacy as well. Larger family gatherings were usually held in the sizable covered pavilion nearer the parking area. As I remember, it was grand. Large, with a wrought-iron railing around three sides, two long picnic tables set up lengthways in the middle, four or more of the grills, a smooth concrete deck and maybe a corner outdoor fireplace, I'm not sure about this last bit though.

Stony Lake is a medium-sized lake for and in the Township of Oxford. It is well suited for aquatic activities such as boating, sun-bathing, swimming and of course, frogman training. That's right, frogman training! Well at least that's what Uncle Mike called it at the time. Apparently this too was some of the specialized training he received in the service, and he was more than willing to share with us. Somehow I think that the training we received was a little bit different than what he had gotten, but not ever having been a Frogman as an adult, I couldn't really say for sure.

Out in the lake, I guess a hundred yards or so from shore was a floating raft. It was covered in green outdoor carpet and had a wooden high-dive built on one side. It was the ultimate goal of the younger kids to one day be able to swim out to the raft alone and spend time with older kids who had already accomplished this ambition. Besides, this where the girls who wore the two-piece bathing suits generally hung out. They wouldn't want to be seen with some kid who couldn't make the raft! Our proving ground though sat jutting from the shore not far from the bathing houses. It was a long floating dock, about eight feet wide.

This dock was perfectly suited for Uncle Mike's training purposes. At the far end of the dock the water was about eight to ten feet deep, and of course gradually got shallower toward the shore. There were no restrictions about jumping or diving in those days, and kids were always doing both all along the length of the dock on either side. Because there were always so many of us, we usually took up a good portion of the dock.

The training was not normally a regimented affair, and often spontaneous, but anytime Uncle Mike was at the lake with us, we knew that it would occur. Uncle Mike liked swimming under the pontoons of the dock and surface in the air space underneath. From there, he could with a quick dip below the

surface ascertain where we were by viewing the multiple pairs of legs he saw wading or swimming about. Then, with the stealth of an alligator, or frogman if you will, he would skim along the bottom until he reached the ideal position from which to launch his strike. SPLOOSH! There he was! Swooping like a great white from the depths, he would grab you by the ankles and pull you completely under in the blink of an eye! One minute you're there splashing happily around on the surface, the next minute you've disappeared from sight. Often times he would drag his unwilling cadet under the pontoons where they would surface in his not-so-secret lair, letting him catch a breath or two before reversing the process. He would of course repeat this until every one had been skirted away at least once. Although I'm don't know if Uncle Mike was ever a Boy Scout, his covert attacks sure taught us how to always be prepared! I do remember that occasionally he would grab the wrong kid but wouldn't realize it until surfaced in the darkened cavity beneath the dock. We all thought it pretty funny when this would happen, knowing that we had escaped his clutches that time, even if by mistake. Usually though the victim didn't. Suddenly you would hear coughing and screaming from beneath the dock, and Uncle Mike trying to reassure the kid that he or she would be ok. He would then tell them to take a deep breath and he would push them underwater and under the pontoon so that they could surface a bit shaken but otherwise unharmed on the other side. A lot of times during frogman training, the beach area mysteriously got more empty and uninhabited, except by us.

Another level of the frogman training involved deeper diving. I mean what good is a frogman if he can't dive deep? Uncle Mike always brought with him something weighted such as a bottle filled with sand, a large bolt from one of his junk car projects, or a bunch of washers tied together with a string. He would toss them from the end of the dock into water about ten to fifteen feet deep. Whichever one of us whose turn it was

would have to dive from the dock and retrieve the object, preferably before it reached bottom. Naturally, if you didn't get it the first time, you would repeat the process until you did. Even those that were not yet master swimmers got their turn. I don't think there was ever a lost object.

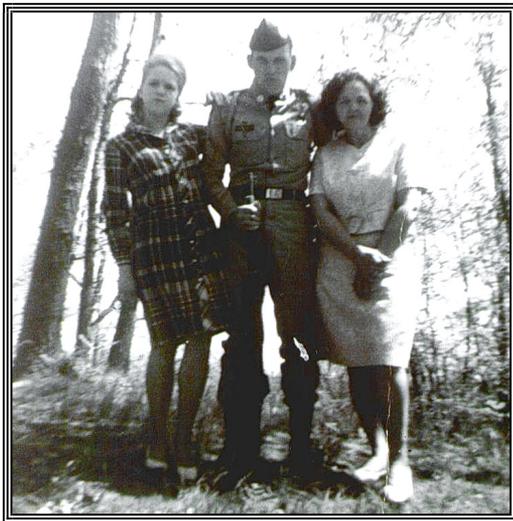
You knew that you had graduated training and had become a master frogman yourself when you could out swim Uncle Mike to the raft. It wasn't easy, and he probably let us win, but I still remember my graduation day. I was pulling for the raft as hard as I could using both surface and underwater swimming techniques. Each time I dared look back, I saw the half submerged figure of Uncle Mike inching closer. Akin to the Loch Ness monster, he would sometimes disappear for a moment only to suddenly reappear just a few yards away. "Swim boy! You better swim!!" he would say. And swim I did! I pulled myself over the side of the raft just as he reached for my ankles. With a knowing wink, he acknowledged my accomplishment and slowly turned back toward the shore, undoubtedly another cadet already in sight.

## BOOT CAMP

I first went to boot camp several years before I actually joined the Navy in the late 1970's, as did all of the boys in the family. Our camp had all of the usual facilities that one would expect. Barracks, dining hall, obstacle courses, firing range, explosives training range and motor pool. Oh by the way, did I mention that this was my Grandma Laney's house? It was a long rectangular two and half story cinder block house sitting on eight or ten acres about seven miles out of town near Oxford, Michigan.

The main structure was of course the house, which had an unusual layout. The main floor consisted of the kitchen, the dining room and a formal living room that we kids couldn't

enter unless invited by Grandma. There were steps adjacent to the side entry door that went to a landing where if you went to the right opened into a long Rec room which served as the barracks for most of us. Further in the back there was a bathroom and other bedrooms for some of my uncles. Going to the left and up a few more steps were another bathroom, Grandma Laney's and Aunt Mary's bedrooms. These were restricted areas and mostly off-limits. The lower level of the house held a large utility room with a side entry in the middle, and at the end of the house directly below the uncle's bedrooms was the explosives storage room. The other structure which sat in front of the house and parallel to the dirt road was the motor pool, or otherwise known as the garage. It too was a cinder block building and big enough to hold two cars, although it was mostly filled with assorted tool boxes, welding tanks and work benches. It was Uncle Mike's headquarters, the place where the various activities were concocted. It was his domain, and he ruled it accordingly.



*HOME ON LEAVE*

As mentioned before, the house sat on about ten acres. Actually surrounded might be a better description. The house and garage sat on the only real flat spot, which was carved from the side of a steep heavily wooded hill. To the left, the hill continued down until it reached what we called the pond. This was more of low-lying catch basin for the brackish swamp water that backed up behind it and on two sides. It was roughly the size of an Olympic swimming pool, but somewhat kidney shaped. Although well-suited for frogs, snakes and turtles, it was not suitable for swimming, at least not voluntarily. There was no real yard so to speak except a small area behind the house where we would engage in PT, physical training, either on the trampoline or the sandy area around it. The hills and wooded areas around the property were laced with several well worn paths leading to other areas of activity.

As kids, my siblings, most of my cousins and I spent almost every weekend and entire summers at Uncle Mike's boot camp. We would all get bunked down either in pallets or sleeping bags on the floor of the Rec room. A typical day might start with reveille at around 7:00AM. We would fall in on the staircase making our way down to breakfast in order of oldest to youngest. But of course, it too was not without a disciplined array. Standing at the bottom of the steps ready to inspect each of us for proper dress, Grandma stood at the ready. She would look each of us over, straighten a collar or beltline, give a firm swat on the butt and send us to the dining room and the smell of pancakes, biscuits and gravy or some other hearty breakfast meant to last until lunchtime, knowing that we would need it, especially if Uncle Mike was expected.

One morning while waiting my turn near the top of the line, I asked some of the others around me if they knew why Grandma gave us all a spanking every morning. No one knew. I therefore determined that when my turn came, I would ask. My uncles, brothers and cousins all looked at me in horror.

“No, don’t do that!” they insisted. But I had already made up my mind, I was going to ask. I guess the word kind of spread down the line because when I reached the bottom, the other kids were gathered around waiting for what would surely be a horrific start to my day. Just as Grandma finished straightening my shirt and was about to administer the swat, I innocently spoke. “Grandma, can I ask you a question?” I started. “Sure honey,” came her reply. “Why do you spank us every morning before we even eat breakfast?” I asked. “I’m glad you asked,” she said. “Some time today I know that you’re going to do something to deserve a spanking. I might not be around to give it to you,” she continued. “So, I better give to you now while I can.” Accepting her explanation, I prepared myself for the swat. “Whap,” there it was! It seemed a bit harder than usual. As I started walking away, “Whap!” there came another, even harder than the first. When I turned to look at her a little surprised, she stood there with arms folded looking at us all. “Are there any more questions?” she asked. Nope, there was not a one. We all scrambled to the table and sat down, me a little more tenderly than usual. As I ate I began to think that maybe Uncle Mike’s training techniques didn’t all originate in the Army after all.

Breakfast was always orderly and we all finished at about the same time. By the time we finished Uncle Mike had arrived and after getting his morning coffee refill, made his way to the garage. As we finished, we were expected to fall in at the garage to hear the daily routine and receive individual instructions. There was no “lollygagging” around the house.

There was always something to do. You might be assigned to help strip parts out of one of the vehicles around the side of the motor pool and ready the chassis for the trip to Sam Allen’s scrap yard, trim some low hung branches of a tree, sweep the porch and rake the dirt approach to the porch, or most commonly, take a trenching tool and continue digging

around the bank where the new retaining wall was going. The trenching tool is a useful tool and I'm sure that most people have seen them, even if they are not familiar with the nomenclature. It is a small folding shovel issued to Army and Marine Corp troops and used to dig foxholes. They were the perfect size for us young ones. While we did dig foxholes too, we most often used them for excavations around the property. Uncle Mike had in an effort to expand the narrow driveway, decided to build a retaining wall on the left side of the house. He engineered it himself, and it was very effective once completed. In fact, the last time I drove by the old house on Coats Road a few years ago, it was still there. It did take several years to complete though as I recall.

Lunch was usually sandwiches, potato chips and Kool-Aid served through the sliding window in the kitchen and consumed on a picnic table between the house and the garage. It always came at just the right time, when you were feeling almost down for the count.

Uncle Mike worked us hard, no question about that, but so too did we play hard. Without a doubt, the most prominent recreational feature was what was called the "Cable Slide." It was what is known of in today's terms, as a "Zip Line," and was many, many years ahead of the now popular trend. This was no ordinary zip line; it might be best described as a zip line on steroids. It was anchored on the uphill side to a large tree directly behind the garage. It ran the full length of the garage, over the driveway and across the bank, the entire length of the pond and ended about fifteen yards beyond the far bank, again anchored to a large tree. It was a 1/4" steel cable tightened with come-a-longs from the roof of the garage.

The roof was also the starting point of the ride. A two-part pulley was positioned over the cable and reattached to a loop of chain that ran to the other side of the pulley. A twelve inch

long metal pipe was placed over the chain to form a rigid handle. You would run down the roof until you reached the edge and became airborne. It didn't take long to clear the driveway where you were immediately about thirty above the ground. As you continued to gain speed, you crossed over the edge of the pond, now about forty feet in the air. Approaching the far side, you had to concentrate on the bank. The only way to slow down was to kick the bank with the bottom of your feet, thus launching you into the air a little more, but also slowing you enough to make a running stop on the short runway. The only other option was to let go somewhere over the worn out area of the runway and well before the anchoring tree. This was not the best way, but I have seen it done many times, and have even done it once or twice myself. I can tell you from first-hand experience that you do NOT want to hit the tree!

Before I was old enough and big enough to ride the cable slide in the fashion just described, I rode it strapped into a parachute harness, as did most of the boys and some of the girls in my generation. Of course when riding this way, some adult was at the other end to catch you. It became a "right of passage" among family and friends to ride it without the harness and we all looked forward, albeit it with some trepidation, to the day that we could.

There was another tradition associated with this ride that no one could escape. During your first solo ride Uncle Mike would be standing on the garage roof, and while you were whistling down the line, he would grab the cable with both hands and putting all of his weight on it, yank it up and down as hard as he could. This made the cable surge up and down by several feet and sway from side to side. It also made the prospect of hitting the far bank correctly much more challenging and resulted in my first ever bailout over the runway. Ah but it was a lot of fun, and provided many

cherished memories! I am certain, without even having to ask, that my brothers, cousins and other uncles all feel the same way.

Other recreational features were the multiple rope swings suspended from some of the large trees around the property. Again, I'm not talking about your run-of-the-mill rope hung from a low-lying branch with a tire attached. No, these were large diameter knotted ropes similar to what could be found in school gyms. Besides swinging, these ropes were used by Uncle Mike for giving us vertical climbing training. One of these ropes was strung from a tree at the top of a bank overlooking the road about twenty feet below. We would swing out over the road in a wide arc ending back at our starting point. Of course most of the time we would wait for a vehicle to approach so that we would swing right over the top of it. Yelling like Tarzan with our feet kicking wildly so as to maintain momentum, we startled many a motorist back in the day. I know that some of them stopped at the house to complain, but once they saw the imposing figure of Uncle Mike, most went away without registering much of one. One of my cousins, Keith, had a bad habit of letting go over the middle of the road. He did it just so that he could bounce. I guess he liked bouncing. Of course he did it when no vehicles were coming. It seemed pretty strange to the rest of us, especially considering that he wore metal leg braces on both of his legs from the ankle to the hip to correct some other problem that he had at the time. What was he thinking? Oh well, as the saying goes; "All's well that ends well."

## THE SOFTER SIDE

Not only was Uncle Mike there to teach us how to be men in the physical sense, but as we got older, in other ways too. He was always there for a family member in need and would help in whatever way that he could. Sometimes it was knowingly

and wise consultation that was sought. Sometimes a shoulder to cry on. Other times it might be a real “No Sh\*ter” of a story that he would tell to get us laughing and remember that life can have a lighter side too.

During the year that my mother was missing, Uncle Mike provided a strong and patriarchal presence in my life that was much needed. I was twenty one and technically an adult, but there were a lot of times that I didn't feel like it. I remember calling him up one time from where I was stationed in Charleston, SC because I was feeling overwhelmed and somewhat lost. Younger brothers and sisters were struggling with the disappearance of mom and all the emotional and financial hardships that came with it. I was caught halfway between guilt and remorse for not being there with them. I was spending many lonely nights just staring at the stars and wondering what to do. I don't remember exactly what he told me that night, but it was something to the effect that he was proud of me, that I was a strong man, and that I would be ok. Although it didn't solve all of my problems that night, I remember feeling a lot better when I got off the phone.

When mom's body was discovered and we all gathered in North Carolina to lay her to rest, of course Uncle Mike was there too. He wasn't the only sibling of hers there, many of my aunts and other uncles made the trip from Michigan also, and they hold very special places in my life that I will recount in future stories. But Uncle Mike was the patriarch, and his presence meant the world to us.

During the trial of my mothers killer some twenty-years later, Uncle Mike and my special aunts stood by our sides again. It was some of the most difficult five weeks that can ever be imagined, and him just being around made it better. After the conviction and before we all left to go back to our homes far away, my siblings and aunts who had never been to the sight

where mom was found decided that they could now go, and in fact needed to go. I know that Uncle Mike had been there before on his own, as had I and another Uncle, David. Some of the law enforcement officials that had helped close this long cold case went along too.



### ***LEADING A PRAYER***

Once there, we all trudged through the snow-packed forest to the spot some fifty yards below the embankment where mom had laid undiscovered for almost a year. We had decided to drive a wooden stake with her name engraved on it into the spot to commemorate that fact that she had not been forgotten. Once that was complete, someone suggested that a prayer was in order. Uncle Mike looked to me as the new de-facto head of the family to lead the prayer. I declined. It may have been my duty, but I could not in good conscience do so. Uncle Mike was the family patriarch. As a sign of respect, I deferred to him. I know that this was another defining moment in our

relationship. The changing of the guard would come, but it would have to be at a later date.

Uncle Mike is retired now and living in Tennessee with his wife Phyllis. They had talked about relocating from Michigan for several years so as to be closer to her children from her previous marriage. I'm glad that they finally made it. Although he never had children of his own, he is a father in every sense of the word. He helped to raise his step-children as if they were his own, including his step-daughter from his first marriage. And as told throughout this story, he helped to raise all of us, his nieces and nephews.

What I have tried to do through these several paragraphs is to describe a very special man, not only to me, but the entire family. My life, those of my siblings and cousins would not be the same if he had not been in it. Uncle Mike is a legend to us all. No disrespect or impunity has been intended, and I am certain that he will take no exception to what has been told. He is one of the greatest men that I have, or ever will know.