

# **“THE HICKSER”**

## **A Short Story**

**By  
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*If you are ever driving in upstate New York- on Route 104, just west of Rochester- and you have some time, stop in at the Clarkson Inn and ask for Tom.*

*You see, Tom is the bartender at the Inn, and if it's not too busy- and if Tom is in a good mood- you just might be in luck.*

*“For what?” you ask.*

*Well, have a seat at the bar, order up a burger and a beer, and ask him about “the pact.” Here is the story that you will hear.*

The “Hickser”- Tom Hicks, Jr.- returned from his tour of duty in Vietnam, as the closest thing to being an hero that Clarkson had seen since “The Big War.” Yet, he was the unlikely hero; the unassuming local kid who had an impressive high school football career while at the same time did well enough academically to be considered “intelligent.” He was a good player- not great- but good enough to have been tendered some athletic grant-in-aid offers, mostly from small private colleges, that- short of a completely free ride- his

parents could never have afforded for him to attend. He knew this, clearly, and instead of pursuing the dream, he decided to give up football and just be a student at the local state university not more than five or six miles down the road.

And so, on that first day of classes- just weeks after his eighteenth birthday- the Hickser stepped out of the door of his house on Ridge Road with the simple intention of being nothing more than a college freshman. He got into his car and began the journey that would, first, lead him to college and, then, ultimately to Vietnam, the cult of being a local hero and finally return him to Clarkson and the Clarkson Inn.

The Hickser loved the freedom of taking a slow drive over to the college and attending class, particularly when he took a notion to go. Yes, college was everything that he had expected and it *began* the way he had planned. Unfortunately, *it did not progress* as he had planned, deteriorating instantly after the midsemester warnings were issued.

The envelope in his mailbox seemed harmless enough. It was of the business-sized variety, with his name hand-printed on the outside. He opened it absentmindedly, not knowing- not even thinking or entertaining- what could possibly be inside of it. There were a few moments of confusion along the

lines of “what the hell is this” until he realized that there were seven cards in the envelope, each individually identifying the six academic subjects he had been signed up for and one physical education course.

He scanned the first card, repeatedly, until he became familiar with its organization. It was an official school card, his name at the top, the name of the course, the section, the instructor, some printed midterm sort of message and then, finally, in the center of the card, near the bottom, was the midterm grade.

Shuffling through the cards he quickly realized that his forte was physical education. It was “Introduction to Football and Basketball” with Goofy Johnson. He had a midterm grade of “A.” It was, however, an “A” in a course that amounted to only an half of a semester hour. The other six midterm grades were less than stellar- in fact, they were dismal. There was a “B” in General Psychology, a “C” in Education, three “D’s,” and an “F” in Zoology.

The theory behind the issuance of the midterm grade reports was that if students knew where they stood, academically, they would be more inclined to adjust their study habits accordingly. Well, it achieved its goal with the Hickser, he totally abandoned the point and purpose of college, and began to pursue a curriculum of drinking and dating whenever the opportunities presented themselves.

Soon, as chance would have it, he found- and became part of- a cadre of four friends- all of whom were in a similar academic stead- who partied and drank and drank and partied through the next two years which just strangely coincided with the decision by the college to throw them all out.

It seems, as the story goes, that one night- somewhere during his fourth semester of failing performance and weeks before he was to be thrown out of school- the Hickser and his other three buddies made a pact.

Also, from the telling of the story, that, yes, the boys had been out drinking that night at the Roxbury Inn, but even to this day- deep into his life as a local hero- the Hickser insists that the alcohol did not cloud their judgement. In fact, it's told that he's often argued that it did have an affect that was just the opposite. The booze, according to the Hickser, enhanced their ability to cut through the so many bullshit layers of fiction, and helped them arrive at a crystal clear understanding of the truth.

The pact began to take on a rudimentary form once the boys returned to their dorm room – the Hickser had moved in with his friends, sleeping now, in however of an unauthorized way, on a makeshift bed in the study room of the suite- where they commiserated and lamented over not only the most recent departure of one of their friends who had been drafted and sent to war, but

also the seemingly greater and greater possibility that one of them- or all of them- could be next.

Between trips to the bathroom and the consumption of even more alcohol, the boys did unearth a prime truth- a first cause- that even, despite their inebriated state, they could embrace wholeheartedly and could commit themselves to, without doubt or question.

That truth was that if you were drafted, it was critically important to do everything in your power to stay alive. Yes, it was simple and, yes, maybe it was blunt, but, to four drunk, draft-eligible college students, it made universal sense. So, with the goal being so defined, the boys set out devising a plan on how to achieve it.

They approached their decision making process with a variety of- “however stupid it sounds drunk, might just make real sense in the sober light of day”- thoughts. To begin, drunk or not, they knew and accepted that even an idiot could see the dangers inherent in being a lowly foot soldier. Their discussion was peppered with talk, stories and images- both in the print media and on television- of those very same foot soldiers killed, crippled or maimed by either direct fire or- even worse- booby-traps.

Just a nice sunny day; walking down some trail on point; your thoughts maybe drifting back to Oklahoma or Georgia or maybe even back to Brooklyn- like they guessed that their recently drafted friend, Zack, was probably doing;

back, to summer evenings hanging out on Ocean Avenue; when all of a sudden your foot catches a trip wire and what had started out as a patrol on two feet and two legs turned into a medevac with only one of the two left.

“Oh, sure,” the boys said- and agreed- to and with each other, “sure, it was a ticket home, but on the other side of the ticket, there, in the really small print- far too small to read in the dim light of a canopied trail- it said that it was also a ticket- and that it was redeemable- to and for a lifetime at a VA hospital of your choice; hours and days and weeks and months- if not years- in rehab, and the very distinct possibility that life as you knew it- life as you had been daydreaming about, just moments before hitting that wire- life, wandering the fields in Miami, Oklahoma; fishing the salt marshes of St. Mary’s, Georgia; or taking subway into the “City” with your pals for a little fun- that those days were probably gone forever. No, drunk or not, the boys knew that foot soldiering was out of the question.

Their thoughts turned to those- what they had heard of as the- “mystical” jobs in the Army, the ones that had you, for example, working in the Quartermaster Corps.

The boys had heard that what they were so diligently trying to avoid- death- was the one phenomenon that was rarely visited upon the Quartermaster Corps.

“Too chancy,” the boys all agreed. What happens if they don’t have any openings?”

Their thoughts bounced around randomly for a time until they alighted onto the general form of the question, “What would be important to the Army?” they all took turns asking. At first, they couldn’t think of anything that was important to the Army.

“Eating,” one of the boys finally called out as he opened another can of beer. “Yeah, we could be cooks!” another said. But, after due discussion, consensus held that being a cook- unless you were already at least one, if not a chef- was as risky as the Quartermaster Corps.

“What about communications?” someone threw out.

Though communications sounded good “coming out of the blocks,” to use a good track phrase, its luster wore off quickly once they began to trade more stories and hearsay anecdotes about communications specialists, under hostile fire, down on one knee, trying to call in for reinforcements- or even maybe an airstrike- and getting blown away. No, communications was quickly rejected, too.

They all sat there, now, drinking beer and thinking- well, at least trying to think with the remaining brain cells that they had yet to kill off.

“Come on! Think!” someone said.

“I’ve got it,” the Hickser said with a look of calm serenity.

“What is it?” the others wanted to know.

“Well,” the Hickser began, “you see, we make a pact that if any of us get drafted we agree to volunteer to fly helicopters.”

“Helicopters?” the other three asked in unison.

“Helicopters,” the Hickser repeated, declaratively.

“Why?” they asked.

The Hickser popped open another three cans of Genesee Cream Ale and passed them around as an indication- and in anticipation- of how long his soon forthcoming discourse, “How Flying Helicopters in Vietnam Can Prolong Your Life,” would run.

“You see,” the Hickser began, “think about it.” These were the famous- almost trademarked- words of the Hickser who stood about five feet eight, weighed about a hundred and sixty-five pounds and applied a “Zen-like” mantra and hard work to try and be the best he could be, well, at least in every sport in the book if not in the classroom.

“Let’s say,” the Hickser continued, “you’re a foot soldier, okay?” he asked.

He looked at his buddies, their faces in frozen, rapt attention.

“You know how it goes- we’ve talked about it- you’re out on patrol, it’s been uneventful, you come around a tree and- pow! You’ve got a hole in you!” He paused to take a long sip of his beer before continuing.

“Now, even if that doesn’t happen, still, for the time that you’re there, you have to live with not knowing what you’re going to do the next day. But, if you volunteer to fly helicopters, you- pretty much- get a good night’s sleep every night. I know that it might not be great- like a night in the country’s worth of sleep- but it would be better than what the foot soldier was getting.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

The Hickser paused for a moment of universal acclaim from his peers before he continued.

“So, each morning that you wake up, you know exactly what you’re going to do. You’re going to get up, get dressed, walk out onto the tarmac, get into that chopper and fly. I suppose that it doesn’t matter what you fly, but I think that if you flew rescue missions- trying to get some unlucky fuck that got shot down- you’d end up being even more important to the Army. In that,” “the Hickser concluded his first point, “you have a level of certainty.”

“Yes, yes,” the others affirmed, echoing each other.

“Of course,” the Hickser added quickly, “there is risk involved. Hell, the biggest risk is that you yourself could get shot down. But, you see, even if that happened- there is certainty. Remember,” he added as a qualifier *and* a caution, “we’re talking about a *level* of certainty as compared with a *degree* of certainty that a foot soldier who- I think we all agreed- has no certainty of living at all.”

The Hickser looked at each and every one of his friends, checking to see that their unanimity was still in place. It was.

“And so,” he continued on, “you have a level of certainty in the knowledge that as a helicopter pilot, you are important to the Army- or, at least more important than a foot soldier. What this means is that you can perform your job with the knowledge- the kind of certainty- that if you do *happen* to get shot down, they will probably bust their asses to get you out.”

Again, there was complete agreement with the wisdom of his thinking.

“Finally,” the Hickser said as an introduction to the conclusion of his treatise- now accepted and renamed- ‘Staying Alive in Vietnam,’ “there is the greater existential question. Yes, guys, the one that deals with the ultimate no-win situation, the negative of negatives, the reason we are talking- the point of my point- death.

As a helicopter pilot, you would have certainty in death. That’s because, if you did get shot down *and* you knew that they were busting their asses to get you out, if they couldn’t, you could die with the *complete* certainty that they tried to get you out.”

The Hickser stopped and looked at his other beer drinking no, actually, beer-guzzling buddies.

“So, what do you say?” the Hickser asked. “Do we have a deal? Do we make a pact?”

It only took moments for four sets of blurry, unfocused eyes to voice- however garbled and unintelligent- complete acceptance of the pact.

Once the pact was sealed by handshakes all around, the four- heretofore boys, but now self-considered men- went back to drinking beer.

Over time, the pact held, was remembered and abstractly spoken about by all four of them until a letter from the draft board arrived.

The Hickser, as cosmic fortune would have it, was the one who received it. He was notified that he was to report for a draft physical. The notification gave him roughly a little over a month to shore up his own personal readiness.

As soon as he received the notification, he also reported to his “pact-mates” so as to both inform them as well as to reinforce and reiterate their pact, and now- because he was going to be the first- his intent to live up to his commitment to their exercise in existential logic.

And so, the Hickser reported for his physical and either passed it or was passed- he never really was quite sure. Nevertheless, in less than a month’s time, he was inducted into the Army and was set to be sent off to basic training.

They- his friends- had one last party for him, the boy turned college student soon to be turned soldier. The four of them were there along with current girlfriends and whoever else just happened to drift in to say hello or goodbye.

Two days later he was gone, whisked away into the void of the military bureaucracy, with all parties hoping that the future would spew him back into civilian life.

They didn't hear from him for a good couple of months. Then, a letter arrived from the Hickser. He said that he had "survived" basic training and was being sent to the Army Flight Training Center.

There were no further words from him until he showed up for short leave before they shipped him out to Vietnam. Again, they had a party and Hickser told them how he had stayed loyal to the pact, and consequently was now a Warrant Officer, an Army helicopter pilot. He said that he had no misgivings about having done it and that, actually, it had turned out better than he had expected.

He asked the others if they had heard from their draftboards. They all said no, at least not yet.

The evening went well. They laughed and joked and reminisced. Then, when it was time to go, they wished the Hickser the best of luck and insisted that he do everything that he could to stay safe *and* alive. He promised them that he would. A couple of days later, the Hickser shipped out for Vietnam.

Then, there was the occasional letter at the beginning of his tour, but by the third month, the letters had stopped entirely, and they didn't hear from him for over a year.

During this time, whenever they happened to get together, the other three would wonder about the Hickser, and even though they knew what the worst outcome might be, out of respect for hope, they refrained from mentioning it.

Seasons passed, holidays came and went, and still there was no word until, one day, each of their phones rang. It was the Hickser and he was alive, “stateside,” and now back in Clarkson.

Hastily, they put together a party at the Clarkson Inn. They were there, the core group of friends- and family members- who assembled to welcome him back.

They arrived expectant and found part of what they were looking for and part of what they were not. The Hickser was a touch wizened from wear, and now walked with a slight limp. But in his eyes, those mischievous orbs that dominated his face, they could see- if they took the time to look hard enough- the same old Hickser.

He told them that ‘Nam was a tough place- a tiring land- and that his limp was the result of getting shot down while trying to rescue downed pilots.

Hickser was modest and almost self-effacing when he recounted his job which quickly took on the trappings of a mission and then metamorphosed into an adventure. He was obviously brave and bordering on fearless and- at least in the eyes of the United States Army- he was also reckless.

Throughout the telling of his tour, if anyone had thought of counting-adding up- the number of pilots that Hickser had rescued, they would also have had to create a separate column, off to the side, identified as “Helicopters Lost.”

The men that he rescued were eternally grateful as was Hickser who- along with the men he was sent to rescue- had to be rescued himself.

That column, “Helicopters Lost”- or crashed or trashed or wasted- would have read, “two.”

Generally, the word “two” is not of sufficient magnitude to draw attention of any kind, except, of course, when each item in the column translates into a multi-million dollar helicopter.

Yes, the Hickser had gotten shot down twice. Two times he sat there on the ground, waiting to be rescued himself.

It was the kind of anecdote that, at Inn in Clarkson, was safe to laugh at and about, but wasn’t quite so funny, back in ‘Nam.

The Army, for the most part, overlooked the first crash. They knew that “young chopper pilots” would always be “young chopper pilots.” But, it was probably because of his increasing reputation- if not legendary status- that the Army decided to take a real close look at the Hickser after the second crash.

The Army assembled a review board that grounded him while they investigated. Then, after a “full and exhaustive examination” the Army issued its finding, a recommendation and its decision, a disposition of the matter.

The findings stated that the crashes occurred as the result of neither mechanical malfunction nor pilot incompetence, but rather hostile fire. It further stated that the fact that the Hickser had never failed in a rescue were- in the words of the Army- “meritorious.”

The recommendation was that Warrant Officer Hicks, as the result of courageous action in the face of enemy fire, should- and would- be promoted.

Further, as a result of his promotion, Thomas Hicks would no longer fly helicopters. In fact, as a reward for his courage and bravery and valor, Thomas Hicks would have a desk job.

The Hickser was stunned by his “promotion.” He sat there on the edge of his bunk and read and re-read the letter that mapped out the remainder of his time in the active Army. Finally, after having read it for the seventh time in a row, he rose from his bunk and went to see his immediate commanding officer.

Captain Stevens was there, in his office, and was more than available and prepared to take the time to talk with the Hickser.

Yes, he had seen a copy of the letter, and, yes, he believed that Warrant Officer Hicks was one of his best helicopter pilots. But, halfway through their

conversation, Captain Stevens sat upright and asked the Hickser, “Can we take a walk?”

“A walk, sir?”

“Yes, a walk; outside, on the parade ground where we can walk and talk and be alone?”

The Hickser looked from the Captain, through the window to the parade ground and beyond, and, then, back to the Captain.

“A walk?” the Hickser asked, rhetorically. “Of course, sir, a walk.”

Captain Stevens came around from behind his desk and signaled with his head for the Hickser to follow him.

They exited the office and walked, together and abreast, toward the parade ground.

“Sir?” the Hickser asked once they were about thirty yards from the office.

The Captain turned to face Warrant Officer Hicks.

“The reason that I asked you to walk with me is because there are things that I want to say that I just couldn’t say back there, in the office, within earshot of anyone else.”

“Sir?” the Hickser repeated, but in a more quizzical tone.

“Well,” Captain Stevens began after glancing circumspectly in all directions, “like I said, first and foremost- you’re one hell of a fine pilot.”

“Thank-you, sir,” the Hickser replied.

“What I also want to tell you,” the Captain continued, “and couldn’t back there is that it is my personal opinion that the Army was wrong.”

“Wrong sir?” the Hickser asked.

“Indeed. Wrong in taking you out of a chopper and wrong in giving you a desk job. It basically just came down to someone deciding that by losing two choppers, you were costing the government too much money.”

“I see. Thank-you, sir,” the Hickser replied.

The Captain smiled ever so slightly while shaking his head. “No, it’s us who should be thanking you; the pilots you rescued, the families, their loved ones- the country- for being an American in whom everyone can be proud.”

Then, Captain Stevens extended his hand to the Hickser, shook it, turned and walked away.

The Hickser sat out the remaining time of his tour of duty, processing paperwork- and tons of it.

By the time it was time to ship “stateside,” he was more than ‘ready, willing and

able’ to go.

*So, basically, that is the story of the Hickser and “the pact.” By this time you may have ordered a couple more beers and it may seem as if Tom has finished his story, but, do know, he does save the best for last. But, first, he will ask you a question.*

*“So, what do you think were my last words in Vietnam?” he’ll ask.*

*You’ll think for a moment, shake your head and probably say, “I don’t know.*

*What?”*

*With that, Tom will pause, step back away from you, lean back and look off briefly, while slowly beginning to nod and smile, simultaneously.*

*Then, he’ll push himself forward- getting real close to you- and say clearly for all to hear-*

*“I was good, and they damn well knew it.”*

**END**