

Rudy Hernandez

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Touch of Smile

By Helen Ross



I had sacrificed almost everything as a Corporal in the U.S.

Army. After seven engagements during the bitter fighting in one frigid winter in Korea, I had the right to breathe and that was about all.

Completely paralyzed on my right side and almost as bad on the left, I could neither talk nor swallow. Nor could I hear too well or think clearly. My bodily functions were beyond my control. And, though I could see, what I saw meant nothing to me. They told me later that I did one thing well. I could smile.

A month after my last battle I finally drifted up to a semi-conscious state in a hospital in South Korea. I was like a newborn babe, completely helpless. In some ways, I was even more dependent on others than a baby is.

Although what caused my condition happened in a second or two there was plenty that led up to that. I was in so many danger spots that it's a wonder I didn't get mine earlier-and for good.

The Account of Torturous Months

The account of those torturous months is another story. In that last battle, a grenade tore away my helmet, a large part of my skull, and a portion of my brain. It's tough to lose an arm or leg but at least you know what you can or can't do about it. You know what is going on. Luckily, doctors can help people with brain damage, and miraculously different parts of the brain can be taught to take over new jobs.

A Life-Altering Injury

When I came to I was unable to move my arms or legs. Tubes and bottles suspended over my bed should have told me that I was being fed intravenously. But I knew nothing, understood nothing.

A Step Forward

One afternoon, there came this most precious Japanese girl. I took a good look at her and thought, "Ah-", and that's as far as I got. When I thought, "Ah-", my chin dropped down and my mouth fell open. At that very moment, she popped a tiny spoonful of ice cream into my mouth. It tasted and felt so good. I wanted more but I couldn't get my mouth open. Then I realized that if I looked at that pretty girl again and thought, "Ah-", it might work. And it did! She laughed and then I came as close to laughing as I could remember. Pretty soon, I was eating everything that anyone would bring to me.

Continued Progress

But I still couldn't feed myself for a long time. I was constantly scolded because I didn't drink the water. Care was taken to bring large pitchers of water to my bedside table as I was considerably dehydrated. But I could neither lift the pitcher nor tell anyone what the problem was. Then one day someone brought a straw. After I got the first sip going I couldn't let go. I drank the entire pitcher of water without coming up for air. Another triumph.

Full Repairs

Finally, I was sent to Letterman Hospital in San Francisco. There, surgeons labored endlessly to repair damage to my skull, face, arm, leg, and other parts of my mangled body. Surgeons must have dulled dozens of needles and scissors sewing and snipping threads for the tiny stitches inside and outside of my body which was pretty muscular.

A large portion of my skull had been shot completely away. Surgeons performed a new operation giving me a pretty thick cranium covered with shiny hairless skin outside and shiny ideas inside, at least they're shiny these days.

Damage to my brain was another thing. Most of my motor techniques had been interrupted. I had lost the simple ability to move or talk. One of my ears had been damaged but I was lucky there. The hearing came back and I haven't had to wear a hearing aid.

A Major Step Forward

Several months passed by at Letterman before I uttered my first word. One day I

wanted desperately to get the Doctor's attention. He stood at the door of the ward listening to another patient. I pulled myself up to one elbow and took a couple of deep breaths. Just as he turned to go, I let out with, "D...d...d...Doc!" I was as surprised as everyone else in the ward. And the Doctor seemed genuinely overjoyed.

Every part of step of progress was like a big victory, not only for me but for nurses and doctors. I could hear them, "Did you know Hernandez talked today?" "Did you hear that he sat up alone?" "Did you see him ..."

The Smile

My buddies cheered me on. I guess those old do-or-die days of sports and combat gave me the courage and stamina to keep on. They said my friendly smile and agreeable nod gave me an air of confidence-made me look tolerant of my failures. Actually, inside I was pretty miserable.

They told me later on that I was always smiling-just a little smile, most of the time. I didn't feel too happy and I didn't realize that I had this rather contented look on my face. When they sewed up my under lip which had been ripped by a bayonet, they must have seen in this touch of a smile. Sometimes it got me in trouble.

Simple Difficulties

Since I could nod "Yes", but couldn't shake my head for "No", more than once I received what I didn't want or failed to get what I wanted or needed. On one occasion a Red Cross lady asked me if I had written my mother. I hadn't, but I smiled and nodded cheerfully, actually trying to indicate, Yes, I would like to write to her. The Red Cross lady moved on.

The next day I followed her around with my eyes. I got her attention and after just a few motions she gave me paper and a pen. I must have spent half-an-hour jabbing and scratching at that paper. Finally, a fellow patient took pity on me and volunteered to write the letter. And because I still couldn't talk, he had to question me endlessly for the message. There was a lot of nodding and frowning, grunting and brow-wrinkling on my part, some laughter on his. The letter took most of the day. After evening chow we tackled the envelope and by "lights out" the letter was sealed and ready to go.

A Mother's Love

Two days later, the same day she received the letter, my mother came to the hospital. A nurse told me she was there and I had no trouble rolling out of bed and getting to the door of the ward. I saw her at the end of the hall, started towards her, jerkily, of course, and I couldn't reach her fast enough to hold her in my arms. She just

stood there. I could see her smile building up, but when I got close enough for her to see my face, there was just a touch of shock, maybe pity.

When I finally got to her and held her in my arms, all the pain and trials and torment slipped away. We stood there, swaying and crying and laughing-and swallowing, me, who had had such a time learning to swallow. I don't know how long we rocked back and forth or what she thought. She never told me. When I finally looked into her face it was so full of love, I knew everything was going to be all right. I've never known such emotion since. I've thought about it a lot and I can almost bring the feeling back when I think of my mother.

Singing

After her visit, I wanted to sing. The very next day, in a speech therapy class, I discovered that even though I still could not talk that I could sing. The therapist was delighted to substitute simple nursery rhymes for my "mmm's" and "d-ds". At first, I felt silly, a grown man singing little kid verses. But I understood that it would help loosen my vocal cords and help my mind. So I wandered around singing and relearning tunes and words that I knew as a child.

After five long years of surgeons, doctors, nurses, therapists of many sorts, and qualifications, there came another period of eight years of work and struggles to attain almost complete control of my body. I still don't have complete mastery of my right arm, but I've learned to write with my left and do most everything with one hand. I can use my right arm for a little leverage, but the hand is not much use. But, that's a small thing.

The Door

I'll never forget the first time that I did anything at all with that right arm. I hadn't been walking very long and wasn't supposed to go anywhere alone. But one night I had to go to the bathroom and didn't want to bother anybody. I got down the hall, leaned against the door, and slowly turned the doorknob with the palm of my left hand. But, when I was ready to come out I realized that I couldn't turn the knob and pull the door back as I had absolutely no strength in my right arm and no grasping ability with my left hand at that time. I couldn't talk at all and it did no good to kick the door with my soft bedroom slippers.

I sat down hoping somebody else would come in, but nobody did and it wasn't too warm in there. So I got up and with my left hand, I placed the fingers of my right hand around the knob. I put my left wrist across my right arm and rotated that part of my arm. I figured if I could turn the knob enough to open the door just a crack I could put my foot in the door. The only trouble was that I couldn't keep my balance when I

stood on my right foot as that was my weak side. I'd have to cross my right foot over my left leg and put my toes in the crack of the door-if I was lucky enough to get that far.

I had it all worked out in my mind. As they say, the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. I tried so darn hard but every time I'd get the door open about half-an-inch, my grasp would slip. I was getting pretty frustrated but after what I'd been through just learning to swallow and eat, get in and out of bed, and to walk, it didn't seem like such a big thing getting locked in a bathroom.

I sat down again for about ten minutes, breathing hard and flexing my muscles. Then, using some of the breathing exercises I had learned recently, I tried again. And the first time, it worked! I got my foot in the door, then my knee, and before I knew it, I was out in the hall. I wanted to shout, "I got out! I got out! Hear me? Rudy Hernandez turned the doorknob and got out of the john!"

The best I could do was smile at a night nurse and point down the hall. She smiled back and said, "Oh, you went to the bathroom. Bully for you." She had no idea how hard getting out was or what I had gone through behind that door.

Honored in D.C.

A few months after I learned to walk, I was told to get ready for a trip to Washington, D.C. I still couldn't talk but my brother went with me and that helped. I felt pretty good in a smart-looking uniform and a bold new look. We went to the White House where President Truman decorated me with the Medal of Honor.

At the time I didn't really understand what was going on. An Aide read my Citation that said that the grenade that blew off part of my head didn't stop me, that I jumped out of the hole and bayoneted six enemy soldiers right in front of me. I fell unconscious, full of bullet holes, grenade splinters, and bayonet wounds. One even got me through the lower lip. It was so bad that they sewed it down giving me a full generous lower lip. That's probably when they stitched in the little smile.

They also said that I halted the enemy advance which enabled my unit to counterattack and retake the lost ground at Hill 420. That's why I was awarded the Medal of Honor. I was just glad to be alive and able to function fairly well.

Reflecting on the Fight

You never realize how precious each system of your body is until you lose it and have to work like the devil to get it back. Who would have thought it possible to retrieve all of those many abilities? It couldn't have happened without the doctors, nurses, and therapists who knew more than I did about my body. They encouraged me and often

seated as much as I did, especially when I was learning to sit, stand, and walk. That was torture. But, then would come a day of success, a step forward, and all the excruciating pain was forgotten, at least for a time. I guess the total experience will be part of me for the rest of my days.

A New Lease on Life

Twelve years after the ordeal in Korea, I went to work for the Veterans Administration in Los Angeles. I still went to therapy sessions, mostly for improvement. For a while, I'd go back into the hospital for short spells, but even that lessened after I married Bertha. And when the three children came along, that was another new lease on life. They depend on me and I have to deliver.

Soon I will have completed seventeen years with the VA as a counselor. My clients are the ones who are badly beaten up, both mentally and physically. I don't have any formula for talking to them, but somehow they get the idea that if I could make it back to a happy and productive life, they can at least try and hope for some happy years ahead.

The pain comes and goes, even as I sit here telling my story. I can fool almost everyone except my wife and mother. They look into my eyes. No matter what the eyes say, I know my lips still wear a little smile, even though, like Raggedy Andy, some of it is stitched in – just a touch of a smile.

“Touch of Smile” was written by Helen Ross and received second place in the article category at the ‘Pacific Northwest Writers’ Conference in 1976. Helen’s husband, Donald Kirby Ross, was one of 15 Americans who received the Medal of Honor for heroism at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Mrs. Ross has interviewed many of her husband’s fellow Medal recipients and written many of their stories as well as much additional Medal of Honor history. Donald Kirby Ross passed away at his home in the Pacific Northwest in 1992. After cremation, his ashes were scattered at sea over the site of his old ship, the USS Nevada.

Heroes Stories Index

[Global War on Terror](#)

[Persian Gulf War](#)

[Vietnam War](#)

[Korean War](#)

[World War II](#)

[World War I](#)

[Civil War](#)

[Spanish American War](#)

[Mexican-American War](#)

[War of 1812](#)

[American Indian Wars](#)

[Revolutionary War](#)

[Other Conflicts](#)



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