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ZERO TO HERO

From Bullied Kid to Warrior

By Allen J. Lynch
Medal of Honor Recipient, with
Richard Ernsberger, Jr.

“Nobody who knew me as a young man would have picked me to become a war hero. *I wouldn’t have.*”
—Allen J. Lynch, in the book’s preface

Fifty years ago this April, Allen J. Lynch was discharged from the U.S. Army, and a year later he received the Medal of Honor. But the act of heroism that brought Lynch that distinction is only one part of a lifelong story that can serve as inspiration to anyone, whether in the military or not.

Lynch is a survivor of bullying, and he continues to cope with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting from his service in Vietnam. In his new memoir, **ZERO TO HERO: From Bullied Kid to Warrior** (Pritzker Military Museum & Library, March 13, 2019, \$25.00), written with Richard Ernsberger, Jr., he passes along life lessons learned during his bullied childhood and rudderless youth, and explains how he coped with the horror of war and the PTSD that ensued.

“The Medal of Honor represents something greater than myself,” Lynch writes. “It isn’t really mine, in fact: I have a duty to wear it to represent all American Service Members, especially those killed in action, along with all those who have never been recognized for their heroism. The Medal of Honor represents selfless service, sacrifice, honor, and duty: It is a symbol of the best of America. And it has given me a



sense of mission, of involvement, and, most importantly, a deep sense of my responsibility to reflect its values, every day.”

The act that earned Lynch his distinction occurred during the two-week Battle of Tam Quan, near the village of My An in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. It was later rated 15th of the 20 deadliest battles in the war.

For the better part of December 15, 1967, he lay hidden in a ditch in “no man’s land,” only several feet from enemy troops, protecting and attempting to rescue two wounded comrades. He had opportunities to escape, but he did not. And, eventually, he got the men to safety and they all survived.

“Lord knows, I wanted to get out of that trench,” Lynch remembers. “I wanted with every fiber of my body to run. I wanted to leave the wounded and get back to friendly lines. But I didn’t. Over the years, I’ve been asked why. I believe that under extreme pressure, we become our real selves. My parents, grandparents, family members, drill sergeants, [my priest] Father Naughton, and others shaped the man I’d become, and when tested, as I was tested in that trench, my decisions and reactions reflected the collective values of those who raised, taught, and trained me over the years.”

Lynch was born in Roseland, a community on the far South Side of Chicago, on October 28, 1945. His working-class father was a stern disciplinarian.

Life lesson 1: “The most valuable idea that my father ever gave me had nothing to do with practical matters. It was about one’s basic character—that every man had a responsibility to live honorably. ‘Life,’ he said, ‘can take everything from you—your family, your friends, and your money. But only you give up your honor.’”

When Lynch was seven or eight, the family moved to Eliza, a resort area on a lake near Chicago, and that’s where the trouble started.

“It’s hard to explain why people are unkind or mean, because bad behavior isn’t rational, he writes. “I rode the bus home for a while—until bullies began pushing me to the back of the bus every day and harassing me during the trip. They’d each give me a good punch before getting off at their stop. Sometimes the other kids would emulate their behavior and push me to the back of the bus. That was their way of trying to get on the good side of the bullies. No one ever stood up to help me and the bus driver pretended he didn’t see what was going on. I felt so alone, and eventually I started walking home.”

His recollections of various bullying incidents will sound familiar to anyone who has been bullied: being pushed over when another kid crouched behind him on all fours, being blamed for everything by the



rest of his class, losing friends who didn't want to be associated with him, being the last chosen for a team in pickup baseball, and even returning to the locker room after a basketball game to find his sneakers filled with urine.

His grades began to suffer from the stress, and his father encouraged him to fight back while his mother encouraged him not to. He did win one fight with a bully, but remained paralyzed by fear. Switching gears, he created an imaginary illness, which resulted in seeing a doctor who offered advice.

Life lesson 2: "Son, everyone has their day to shine," the doctor said. "These kids who are pushing you around are shining now. But one day it will be your turn."

Lynch never forgot those words and they were indeed prescient.

In seventh grade, bullies shook down Lynch and a few other boys for money in exchange for not beating them up. Lynch's father found out, and confronted the boys in the principal's office, scaring them with his ferocious temper. That ended the bullying for the time being. And from that example of his father's caring for him, he learned

Life lesson 3: Selfless service to others.

And although he now questions his mother's pacifism in the face of bullies, he credits her for an empathetic mindset.

Life lesson 4: Think about others and it will help keep you from feeling sorry for yourself.

"Negative experiences are rough, nobody wants them," Lynch writes. "But there's some validity to the old saying about clouds with silver linings. Hard times can offer opportunities for personal growth, if one is resilient. I was."

When Lynch moved on to high school, he struggled to find an identity and bullies picked on him again. He finally realized that he needed to look inward.

Life lesson 5: If you find your flaws and recognize your shortcomings, you can become a better, more successful person.

He graduated from high school and worked at a series of unskilled jobs until making the decision to join the army. "In the early 60s, if you didn't go to college or into a trade school, you got drafted," he writes. "I wanted to chart my own course after graduation, not wait for something to just happen. I decided I would join the army and get my service out of the way."



On November 9, 1964, he enlisted in the U.S. Army. In mid-January of the New Year, he finished basic training. “Just graduating basic training was a huge accomplishment, both physically and mentally.”

Still suffering from low self-esteem, though, he withdrew from Officer Candidate School when the going got tough.

In April 1966, enticed by promises from a counselor, he chose to reenlist for another three years while serving in Germany. “I couldn’t know, of course, what an epic decision that would prove to be,” he writes. “One that would radically change my life...little did I know that Vietnam would push my personal development, rapidly, to a much higher level. I’d just have to go through hell before I got there.”

In February 1967, he requested a transfer to the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam. “I’ll never forget my First Sergeant’s response when I handed him the 1049 [transfer] form. He read it, looked up at me, and said, ‘You know, it’s for real over there, Lynch, and unless you change your attitude you won’t last a week.’”

Several weeks later, he was in a C-130 transport plane making a combat landing at An Khe, Vietnam. Operating mostly out of Landing Zone English, a forward base in the Central Highlands, he and his platoon spent months trying to find and kill the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in their area of operation.

His days were marked by intense boredom alternating with the adrenaline rush of battle. In one of the book’s more heartbreaking scenes, he watches his best buddy get shot and killed by one of the platoon’s own men. “It was an accident, but that fact didn’t erase the horror,” he writes.

Then came the December 15, 1967, incident that resulted in his Medal of Honor. He recounts the day in detail, relying not only on his memory, but also on U.S. Army after-action reports, daily staff journals and morning reports, and accounts prepared by other soldiers. The result is certainly the most harrowing passage in the book, providing an almost minute-by-minute account of his time in no man’s land.

He left Vietnam on May 1, 1968, and became a Battalion Career Counselor, earning the best reenlistment record in his brigade. On April 25, 1969, he was honorably discharged. The following May, he was presented with the Medal of Honor.

This led to a call from the director of the Chicago Veterans Affairs Regional Office, who gave Lynch a job as a Veterans Benefits Counselor. He began counseling veterans on employment opportunities, and as part of that, led group therapy as a co-therapist.

At about the same time, he had his first experiences with what would come to be known as PTSD: “startle reactions” and “intrusive thoughts.” Over the next few years, his memories of Vietnam came to torment him, and he sunk into depression. Things came to a head in 1980 when he exploded in anger at his boss and quit. He later apologized and got his job back—but the incident also led to his friendship



with a social worker who helped him “unload a little emotional and psychological baggage” through talk sessions. Still, he writes, “I kept thinking the world would be better off without me.”

And just as his own father had, he became dependent on alcohol. In 1983 he became Executive Director of the Chicago Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program—and social drinking went with the job. After two years, he went to work for the Illinois Attorney General, doing advocacy work for veterans, which included reading medical files about veterans with PTSD.

Throughout Lynch’s life, family and faith have played an important role. His wife, Susan, has been at his side for nearly 50 years, supporting him through his struggles with PTSD and alcohol. His three children and grandchildren are all sources of pride. And Bible study has allowed him to be a spiritual giver, leading groups for men both at his church and in prisons.

In 1992, he finally filed a claim for PTSD and was diagnosed. He writes that the therapist gave him “the tools to first keep PTSD in check and then to defeat it when it reared its ugly head.”

“In retrospect, I truly believe my long personal conflict made me a better, more dedicated veterans advocate,” he writes. “Having received the military’s highest medal, I have a duty to represent with dignity all those who serve and have served. My peers put me in for the Medal of Honor, and I try to honor them with how I live my life and through my service to my fellow veterans.”

Life lesson 6: “One must persevere in life. There are so many people who get a bad start in life, for one reason or another—and have given up on themselves. They’ve come to conclude that their lives will never improve. I’m proof that life can be turned in a positive direction. Being bullied in school made me nothing more or less than a survivor. It gave me an inner strength that got me through life-or-death combat situations and later helped me battle post-traumatic stress disorder for more than forty years.”

Lynch found several ways to turn his life in a positive direction and serve his community and fellow veterans. He worked for the Attorney General for nearly 15 years, winning hundreds of thousands of dollars for veterans by representing them in appeals for coverage. He has spent his off-duty hours speaking to schools, community groups, church groups, veterans groups, and other organizations on the topics of bullying, PTSD, and leadership. After he retired, he started the Allen J. Lynch Medal of Honor Veterans Assistance Foundation with his friend John Schwan in 2012. In five years, they helped hundreds of veterans help themselves, and the foundation is now under the umbrella of the Operation Support Our Troops America. “I can’t imagine having a better legacy,” he says.

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About the authors

Allen J. Lynch is a native of Illinois, a combat veteran of the Vietnam War, and a Medal of Honor recipient, with a lifelong career of devoted service to U.S. military veterans.

Richard Ernsberger, Jr., a 20-year veteran *Newsweek* reporter and editor, co-authored *The General: William Levine, Citizen Soldier and Liberator* and *Lest We Forget: The Great War*.

About the Publisher

The Pritzker Military Museum & Library is a living memorial to those who serve, offering a world-class collection of resources on military history and affairs to the public. It makes available thousands of books and veterans resources through interlibrary loan and uses artifacts, many donated by service members and families, to create physical and online exhibits that tell stories of service. The Museum & Library broadcasts the experiences and insights of authors, military leaders, scholars, and veterans through podcasts, television shows, and videos. Explore more at pritzkermilitary.org.

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