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Kevin O'Hara: Airman Higgins, the courageous

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By Kevin O'Hara, Special to The Eagle

PITTSFIELD

While "Gentleman Jim" Lonborg of the Red Sox was pitching his one-hit gem against the Cardinals in Game 2 of the 1967 World Series, I was sadly packing my bags for a morning flight to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Talk about bad timing! Just imagine -- my "Impossible Dream" team was playing in the Fall Classic for the first time in my lifetime -- and I was off to boot camp!

That evening, after Boston had tied the Series at a game apiece, I called my older brother, Jimmy, stationed with the Army in Kansas. "Jim, do you think I'll get to watch the Series at Lackland?" I innocently inquired. He laughed knowingly.

"Kev, for the next six weeks, you might as well be in Sing Sing."

Jimmy was right. Lackland was a deplorable place where my beloved Red Sox didn't even exist.

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Upon my arrival, I was shorn, inoculated, and even made to wear boxer shorts! Two days later, during the infamous ritual known as "Shakedown," our flight of 60 recruits were stripped of all personal items, including my treasured boyhood mementos I was loathe to lose. Our foul-mouthed drill instructor, Sgt. Bell, warned if further contraband was found, the guilty party's next address would be Fort Leavenworth.

After lights out that night, a fresh-faced kid named Higgins from New Hampshire, leaned across from his top bunk next to mine, and whispered, "O'Hara, you're a Red Sox fan, right? Well, bad news. Our boys are down 3-1 in the Series."

I squinted through the darkness: "How do you know?"

He revealed a small transistor radio under his pillow.

"Holy Cow!"

"Shh, if I get caught, I'm doomed!"

"Doomed?" I gasped. "You'll be shot at The Alamo! How did you get it through Shakedown?"

"Stuck it in my fatigues, where else?" he snickered. "And get this, I found a station that gives a play-by-play of the day's games after the 11 o'clock news. Game Five was played this afternoon at Busch Stadium, right, and those braggarts, Maris and McCarver, boasted they weren't even going to pack their bags for Boston. But we'll show 'em. Oops, gotta go. Game time."

He squirreled beneath his covers, only to emerge minutes later sporting a grin wider than Boston Harbor.

"Lonborg threw a two-hitter! That'll take the fizz out of the Redbird bubbly, won't it? Now back to Fenway for Games 6 and 7."

Next day, a travel day for the teams, Higgs and I buddied up like old pals; crawling through muddy fields, getting snagged up in barbwire, and surviving the Smokehouse. Later, during mandatory sprints, we had great fun pretending to be Yaz and Petrocelli; stealing second, rounding third, and digging for home before a thunderous Fenway crowd. Yes, the Bosox would prevail, we both believed, and so would we.

Next night, after tracking the report of that pivotal sixth game, Higgs emerged from the covers with his face glowing like a jack o' lantern.

"Rico, Yaz and Reggie all hit homers in the fourth inning, a Series record! We're going to Game Seven!"

"Shut your traps," came a warning voice from below.

"What's all the commotion?" shouted our flight leader, Lysonski, springing from his bed. Higgs and I didn't make another peep till morning's light.

Next day -- Columbus Day -- was no holiday for us zero-strippers, just more rigors of running ragged beneath the blistering Texas sun. That evening, though, while we were polishing our chukka boots, rumors filled the barracks of a second Shakedown. I whispered pleadingly to Higgins.

"You gotta ditch that radio. If you get caught, you'll be tossed into the brig after a merciless blanket party!"

Higgs looked at me as if I had two heads: "Gibson against Lonborg. Game Seven. Fenway Park. No way."

The seventh game had long concluded when we hit the sack that night, joyous fans celebrating in either St. Louis or on Yawkey Way. When Higgs ducked under his sheets for the final radio report, I looked out anxiously from my high perch, afraid a phalanx of MP's might storm our barracks and drag Higgins from his bunk to God knows where.

Agonizing minutes passed, and I noticed Higgs squirming beneath the sheets -- a bad sign, I figured. He eventually crawled out from the covers as if his deathbed, the life drained out of him.

"Lonborg's arm couldn't go on after two day's rest," he murmured. "Cards win 7-2."

I dropped my head, heartbroken, my hometown hopes coming to a bitter end. But Higgins's suffering was far worse, his muffled sobs carrying through the long night.

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After chow next morning, Sgt. Bell bellowed "Shakedown!" We snapped to attention as he stormed down the long aisle, flipping over footlockers and stripping beds like a raging bull. But Higgs remained unflinching -- his radio covertly dumped with his breakfast tray.

I never saw Higgins again after boot camp, his orders sending him to South Dakota, while I tripped up the road to Austin. But as I watched the Red Sox recent triumph over the Cards, I wondered if old Higgs ever looks back on those bygone days as I do, when we grittily dashed around those imaginary base paths at Lackland Field, thinking only of home.

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