

5:32 to Glory: Part I

Hale Hinrich was tired. No, that was not the word. The words were worn out. There was nothing left in his system. He sat and gazed at his coach, Terry Moore, his mentor on the Navy football squad. Moore stood around 5 foot 8, and weighed in at a square 190, making him a large man. “Hinrich!” he barked, “we’re 90 yards and 11 points from where we need to be. You have 5:32 on the clock. Get it done!”

“Yes sir,” answered Hinrich, too exhausted to argue. Hale’s six foot three, 200 pound frame was slumped, and his dark brown hair was pasted to his forehead. The rippling muscles that had made him such an imposing figure were slack. His bones hurt, his tendons ached, and his entire body was crying out for rest. His soul, his very heart and soul screamed with agony with every step he took. His body burned with the intensity of one thousand bonfires, results of hours of hitting. He had been playing both ways for the whole game: strong safety on defense, and quarterback on offense. Their starter, Cutter Reynolds, had gone down with a torn ACL on the first play of the game, and Hinrich had been in ever since. Trailing their sworn rivals, the Army Black Knights 27-16, the chance at a comeback seemed hopeless. The Midshipmen had pounded the football, rushing 62 times for a mere 131 yards, an abysmal average of barely 2 yards a carry. The Middies had twice gotten the ball deep in Knight territory, but were forced to settle for field goals both times.

“Alright boys, up and at ‘em,” Moore called. “Hinrich!” he pulled aside the quarterback, and whispered the play: “Single 67 spread gold motion 9.” Hinrich dutifully repeated the play, and moved out to the huddle.

“Alright, no motivational speeches from this man: Single 67 spread gold motion 9, on 4.” The play was simple by Navy standards: four wideouts, 2 to each side, with one tailback. The tailback went in motion right, and ran a fly, while the inside receivers on each side ran deep outs and the outside receivers ran posts. The ball would be snapped on the fourth sound out of his mouth. “Ready, break!”

Hinrich came under center for this snap, and as he got under, he scanned the defense. Army was sitting in nickel, probably in a cover 2: in all passing situations that was the defense they had been playing. The nickleback was moving towards the weak side, away from the tailback’s motion side. Hinrich audibled to a quick count: “41 Strong Slip! 41 Strong Slip!” The audible changed the snap count to the first sound out of his mouth, called off the motion, and sent the back into the flats on the same side as he would originally go to. “Blue!” and the ball was snapped. Hinrich dropped back and settled in the pocket, scanning for his receivers. His check-off was simple: left to right with his tailback as his safety valve. He looked to his left for the post: Joe Dischelli was covered like white on rice by two men. Smart thing, too; he was the Midshipmen’s best receiver. John Rhodes, the flanker, had terrible position on the corner, so he moved back over to the middle of the field to find his other split end, Thomas Rhodes, John’s twin brother, making another move on the safety. *No way can I thread that needle.* His protection began to break down, and he stepped to his right, avoiding a linebacker as he finished his read. Clarence Lawyer, his other flanker, had slipped, and was on the turf fifteen yards down field. He turned to Taylor Mickey, the tailback who had moved right, and flipped him the ball. The roar of the crowd grew as Mickey made the first man miss and moved

to the middle of the field. Hinrich sprinted after him, looking for someone to kill. After the pass, the wideouts were given the name headhunters: they looked for someone they could drill before anybody knew what was going on. Hinrich was two steps behind Mickey when the tailback stutter stepped to avoid another man, and the quarterback seized the opportunity to jump in front of him as a lead blocker. The first person to enter his field of view was the strong safety, who had just gotten up after being punished by Thomas Rhodes, and Hinrich put a shoulder into his breastbone, knocking him back down into the turf. Hinrich stayed in front of Mickey as they dance down field. The nimble tailback stiff-armed another defensive back with such ferocity that he broke one of his fingers on the face mask, but he kept running. Hinrich saw they were now nearing the right sideline again, and with no one in front of them, he peeled off to find someone to put on his back. Garrett Lord, the free safety who had blitzed without remorse the entire game and wreaked havoc in the Navy backfield, was bearing down on the pair. Hinrich got low, broke down, and drilled Lord in the hips with a block that folded him up like a chair. The untouched Mickey sprinted in the end zone without breaking stride. Looking back at Hinrich, the “Mighty Mouse”, as the rest of the team called him, extended an arm towards Hinrich. The quarterback raced in the end zone and slapped him on the helmet. “You owe me one!”

As the clock neared one minute, Hinrich paced the sidelines with the fervor of a caged animal. The two-point conversion had been successful, and the Midshipmen had trailed by three, but Army was driving. Hinrich wasn't allowed to go back in because Coach Moore wanted to save his arm, but Hinrich was getting angry. Finally, in a show

of disobedience that got him a severe disciplining the next day, he ran onto the field, and yelled at the strong safety that was in. "Glock! Get off the field!" Glock raced off the field just as the Middies and the Knights broke their huddle. "Goal line cover one strong safety go!" Everybody except the free safety was crashing the line, not letting anyone release. The off-tackle run came as no surprise, but it was met with such resistance by the Navy defense that the tailback crumpled for a 3 yard loss. The Midshipmen burned their first timeout, and on the next 2 plays stopped them, forcing the Knights to call a timeout of their own to figure out what to do. There were 43 seconds left as the Knight field goal unit came onto the field. It was a 53 yard kick, but definitely in the range of the Knight kicker. The snap came quickly, but the holder didn't grab it. Instead, the kicker snagged it and quick kicked it down to the Navy 3. First and ten with thirty-nine seconds to go. Navy was 97 yards from home.

Coach Moore was angry. No, that wasn't the word. The word was fuming. Hinrich had entered the game, without permission, and burned all his timeouts. He grabbed Hinrich by the collar of his shoulder pads. "I swear to god, if you don't score, I'll hang you by your ears."

"Don't worry, coach," said Hinrich with a wink, "I'll get it done."

"Alright, run it again."

"Spread 67-," started Hinrich.

"Yeah. Get it done."

Hinrich trotted to the huddle, and turned to his teammates. "Single 67 spread gold motion 9 on two. Single 67 spread gold motion 9 on two. Ready, break!"

Hinrich trotted up to the line, and saw that the Knights were set up in a dime defense, with their linebacker cheating back. He motioned Mickey out to the right, and dropped back. He read differently this time, working from left to right rather than by route. Dischelli was the first mark, and his lanky six and a half foot frame was several yards beyond the corner. It was a perfect situation, and Hinrich checked to make sure the safety wasn't too near, and then released. Dischelli was fifteen yards up the field when he caught the pass, and he gained another 17 before getting knocked out of bounds by the safety. At the 35, Hinrich moved to their first no huddle play: Spread double clock. Still in the spread formation, the split ends ran down out and ups, and the flankers ran 15 yards down field before cutting to the nearest sideline. Mickey would stay in to block for a few seconds before darting out to the flats on the right side. Hinrich took the snap and rolled to his left, away from a fierce Army pass rush, but found John Rhodes down field for a 28 yard gain, and trotted out of bounds. With 24 seconds left, the Midshipmen had the ball at the Army 38, when the call came in through his helmet. Gold counter draw. He called it, got under center, dropped back to pass, and then handed it to Mickey who looked like he was shot out of a cannon, and raced to the Army 16 as the clock stopped to reset the chains. 56 North was the next play, and as Hinrich got under center the clock began to tick. He snapped quickly, and fired a rocket to Lawyer, who got out of bounds at the two with 12 seconds left. Looked over to the bench, and Moore relayed the call. Fivers bunch left spread V. The play called for the three receivers on the left to bunch up, and on the snap have the outside man run a deep curl to the back of the end zone, while the middle man ran a post, and the inside man ran a drag. The two men on the right, Lawyer and Mickey, would find holes and settle down in them if it was a zone. In a man,

they would take their men to the back corner of the end zone to keep them away from Dischelli and the Rhodes twins. Hinrich took this snap from the shotgun, and stepped to his left. Dischelli wouldn't be a viable target since he was 30 yards away from the right hash mark and double covered. Thomas Rhodes, the middle man, had some separation, but was running right towards the safeties, so that was a no go, too. John Rhodes was locked up underneath with a linebacker, and Hinrich saw that he had to take matters into his own hands. But Garrett Lord, the biggest annoyance the Navy had faced since the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, rolled with him. A sure tackler, Lord would most likely wrap up Hinrich before he could get outside enough to outrun him to the end zone. Then Hinrich saw Mickey settle down, and lifted his right hand to point towards him. Lord shifted his weight towards Mickey, and Hinrich took off. Six...five...four...three...the clock ticked. Hinrich sprinted for the Pylon, and saw Dischelli punish his man, and knew that it was simply a race with Lord. Lord was right behind him, and Hinrich settled down lower to get ready for a dive. As he exploded for the front corner, Lord reached for his legs and pulled him back. With his broad six foot three body extended, and his arms reaching forward, Hinrich slammed the ball down into the end zone with a dramatic finish. The whistle of the referee signaled touchdown, and the clock showed nothing. But there was yellow decorating the field.

Two different flags said holding, and the Midshipmen were back to the twelve. Hinrich was furious. He jogged to the head referee, and pointed and pleaded, but there was no change in the call. Moore sent in the field goal kicking team in an attempt to tie the game, and the receiving corps left the field. Billy Cullick was a lanky Nebraska native

who had a leg to rival the great Pelé, and was the Midshipmen kicker for the season. He stretched his legs, and took a couple of practice swings. They lined up for a short twenty-nine yard kick, easily within the range of Cullick. As Hinrich settled down on one knee, he glanced off to his left, where he saw wide open space. As he made up his mind, he flipped his hands open to signal for the ball. But Army played to the statistics, calling a timeout in an attempt to ice Cullick, but all it did was give Hinrich and the rest of the squad a chance to rest their legs.

“Gentlemen,” started Moore, “this is what the entire season is about. We are here because this is what Navy does at the end of every season. We meet the Knights head to head on the field, and we win! We’ll kick this ball and make them beat us. We know we can move the ball, we know we can stop them. This is what it’s all about. Fight. Live. Win. Midshipmen on three. One, two three!”

“*Midshipmen!*” the chorus of football players growled. They hit the field at a trot, and set up. Once again, Hinrich gazed to his left and saw wide open space. He flipped his hands.

“Ready! Set! Snap!” Hinrich barked out the signals and the ball shot into his hands. He got up and sprinted to the end of the line, not caring if Coach Moore was angry, not caring about whether he would make it, he just ran with the ball. And then he saw it. He saw turf. It was beautiful to Hinrich, who hadn’t seen this much green since his summer when he had mock-battled with some Marines the last summer. He pumped his legs like pistons, surging forward towards the goal line, when Garrett Lord churned his way, rumbling like a freight train, towards the Navy hero, and Hinrich knew right then that he was toasted. Lord was faster, stronger, and wasn’t quite as tired. Hinrich then saw

his chance. He cut to his right and turned square towards the goal line, and saw the fear in Lord's eyes. Hinrich put his head down tucked the ball, and slammed into Lord and ran him over, dragging the Knight safety into the end zone.

Absolute chaos deafened the stadium, as every single Navy vet and cadet rose as one, roaring with passion, unbelieving that they had just witnessed a classic example of American behavior, a microcosm of American society: underdogs never giving up, and reaching the top. Hinrich was too tired to celebrate, and simply stood up and helped Lord to his feet. They embraced in the end zone, blue and white uniforms that were patched with green. Soon afterwards, every single member of the Navy football team jumped onto Hinrich, and after they dog piled him, they lifted him onto their shoulders and carried him into the tunnel, right underneath the scoreboard that read Navy 30, Army 27.