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 August 7, 2017

 Southbury, CT

**F**inished with the second of three intense thirty-minute sessions on one of the nearby treadmills, Jimmy Richardson breathed heavily as he recovered from his Monday morning workout. Soaked with warm sweat, his blue Nike shirt clung tightly to his chest and back. Standing next to one of several large floor-to-ceiling glass panels which served as the front of the Catalyst Health and Fitness Club, he used a small white hand towel to wipe the results of his daily workout off of his arms and face. Unlike others who used the facilities at the spacious modern gym, Richardson, as he always did, used a freshly laundered towel he had brought from home.

Neither neurotic nor a germaphobe, the twenty-six-year-old Richardson chose to use his own towels for other reasons when he worked out at the gym. Born into a family whose roots stretched back for several generations in Southbury, Connecticut, a middle-class community desperately trying to hold onto its rural heritage, the former football and baseball star was still an area sports legend. While most of his reputation had been established from the feats he accomplished on the athletic fields at nearby Pomperaug High School, some of it, both good and bad depending on which side of the fence his supporters and detractors stood, came from something he did not do.

After winning three state championships, two in football and one in baseball, and after graduating with eight varsity letters, two Connecticut High School football Player-of-the-Year awards, and one All-State award as the best baseball catcher in Connecticut, Richardson did the unthinkable. At least, to some people he did.

What he did was something people still talk about. Some, even to this day, still shake their heads over the decision he made. As someone who was not only one of the best physical specimens to ever come out of his small hometown, and certainly one of the best athletes to ever play sports in western Connecticut, Jimmy Richardson was also one of the most academically gifted students his high school had ever produced. Heavily recruited by several Division 1 college football programs since the start of his junior year, Richardson did the unthinkable, turning down all of the scholarship offers he received. Among them was a full-ride to one of the nation’s most prestigious schools, the University of Notre Dame.

Instead, despite the concerted attempts of many of his fans and friends who tried talking him into playing football at one of the best D-1 programs in the country, Richardson followed his heart, and a family tradition. In doing so, as his older sister had done two-years earlier, he enlisted in the United States Army as eighteen other male members of his father’s side of the family had previously done since the start of the American Civil War. It was the result of a decision he had made on his own years earlier. While he enjoyed the recruiting process and the attention that came with it, and while briefly tempted to accept Notre Dame’s offer, in the end nothing was going to make him change his mind. Neither the attention he garnered from playing high school sports nor the generous scholarship offer he received from his favorite college was going to change his plans of joining the army.

While never regretting his decision to serve his country, his decision to do so soon caused the quality of Richardson’s life to change dramatically. For those members of his family who had served before him during America’s involvement in numerous wars and conflicts, military duty had also cruelly impacted a few of their lives. Among those family members who had been injured was his paternal grandfather. Now ninety-two years old, Delbert Richardson had been seriously injured on three different occasions in two separate battles. A highly-decorated World War II Marine, he had been fortunate to survive the intense fighting which had taken place at Tarawa and Okinawa.

Standing by one of the large glass windows toweling himself off, Richardson watched as shoppers of all different shapes and sizes passed by on several of the Southbury Plaza’s wide sidewalks. Separated by only a half-inch panel of lightly tinted glass, he spent several moments wiping away the sweat which continued to collect on his forehead and around his right eye. As he did, he noticed a young teenaged girl staring intently at his prosthetic right leg.

“I had it cut off a few years ago,” Richardson joked, interrupting what he had been looking at outside the window and the young girl’s gaze. “I found that I just wasn’t getting enough out of my morning workouts, so I thought this fake leg might make my aerobic sessions much more challenging.”

Already upset from being caught staring at what little remained of Richardson’s leg, what the former Army Ranger had just told Shelly Lawrence now mortified her. On the verge of tears, Lawrence fled towards the gym’s double set of front glass doors, ignoring Richardson’s attempt at a weak, but sincere apology.

While feeling a touch of remorse for what he said, Richardson chuckled to himself as he slowly pulled back the black eye patch covering the space where his eye had once been. Quickly, but very carefully, he used his towel to wipe away the sweat which had collected around and behind the now wet patch. Still sensitive about the damage done to his face, as well as the loss of his eye, Richardson refused to use any of the gym’s towels. Always on guard against infections, he feared those used by others had not been laundered properly or an inferior grade of soap had been used to clean them.

“Thank God she didn’t see me doing this. That would have really freaked her out.” Richardson thought as he pulled his eye patch back in place. Still standing next to the window, he watched as the frightened teenager opened the driver’s door of her vehicle. From where he stood, Lawrence’s VW Bug sat less than seventy yards away. Finished adjusting his eye patch, he wiped the remaining sweat from his face. “Guess I need to go find her so I can apologize for scaring her. Maybe buy her some flowers or . . .”

Realizing the sorry state of his financial situation caused Richardson to quickly dismiss his thoughts of making amends to Lawrence. As he stood watching her compose herself, he also realized the high school sophomore who had nearly puked on his Nike sneakers, one of which was tied around the bottom of his stainless steel leg, likely never cared to see him again.

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Three years earlier, while part of a United States led convoy in the Maiwand District of the Kandahar Province of Afghanistan, Jimmy Richardson’s life changed when the military vehicle he was riding in struck a roadside bomb. In the explosion, which occurred within one of the most violent sections of the Taliban’s spiritual heartland, the young Ranger, a member of the U.S. Army’s 1st Battalion’s 36th Infantry Regiment, barely escaped death. In the front cabin area of the tightly packed vehicle he had been riding in, two of his friends had not been as fortunate. Evacuated soon after the battle had concluded, Richardson was medevacked to Kandahar Air Field with his lower right leg barely attached to his knee. In addition to his leg injuries, he had also sustained significant injuries to both the left side of his face and to his left hand. Like the permanent injuries to his eye and leg, his facial injuries were also the result of being struck by shrapnel, shards of broken glass, and other flying debris.

After undergoing six operations and several long stints at four U.S. Army Hospitals, including the Heathe N. Craig Joint Theater Hospital at Bagram Airfield, two others in Wiesbaden, Germany and, finally, at the Womack Army Medical Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Richardson returned back home to Connecticut. Arduous weekly visits to the Veterans’ Hospital in West Haven, Connecticut soon followed.

Fifteen months after nearly being killed, and after receiving a handful of medals for the injuries he sustained, Richardson was quietly separated from the army by way of a Medical Evaluation Board. For his service to his country, and for the active duty injuries he sustained, he was issued a tax-free service related pension for the whopping amount of three-thousand three-hundred dollars a month. One year after his discharge had become formal, as a result of a loud and prolonged public outcry that was supported by intense political pressure exerted on the army by several of Connecticut’s federally elected representatives; Richardson’s pension was increased by another twelve-hundred dollars a month due to his permanent injuries.

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Finished cooling down from the second phase of his daily workout, one considered intense even for those with both of their legs still functioning properly, Richardson prepared to face the next part of his grueling workout; thirty minutes of elliptical training. As he did, he looked out the window to make sure Lawrence had safely moved on. Looking out, the sudden movement of an armored car on the far side of the plaza’s parking lot caught his attention. It was a vehicle he had seen several times before during his morning workouts.

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**S**taring at the dark gray colored armored car parked in front of the McDonald’s restaurant on the far side of the Southbury Plaza, a neat mid-sized shopping district sitting adjacent to Interstate 84, Richardson watched as the driver of the Brink’s truck waited for his partner to emerge from within the fast food restaurant. Like several other stores within the rectangular shaped plaza, including Dress Barn, Panera Bread, and a dozen or more locally owned shops and stores, Brinks, with its small fleet of Connecticut-based armored cars, serviced several of the stores twice a week. They all were located within three hundred yards of where Richardson now stood watching.

Carefully eyeing the armored car as it slowly moved away from the fast food restaurant to its next stop within the plaza, Richardson’s financial woes surfaced again as he continued to stare at the shiny gray truck.

Several minutes later, after the armored car had made its third stop, this time outside a local bank, Richardson began making several mental notes as one of the armed security guards reentered the vehicle. As he did, on a wall adjacent to where he stood, he took notice of the time displayed on one of the gym’s clocks. Among the other facts he began gathering was the day of the week, the age and physical condition of the guard responsible for servicing each of the retail establishments, and the number of other vehicles parked across the various sections of the large parking lot. He also took note of several security features the armored car was equipped with, and of the rather cavalier approach the armored car’s driver displayed toward his job. Most importantly, he took note of one other detail.

“Today’s Monday, it’s just after eleven a.m. and this armored car has already made several stops just in this shopping center alone.” Richardson thought as he continued to stare at the driver of the armored car. The middle-aged male was someone he soon believed to be far more interested in his texting than he was in keeping a watchful eye on the comings and goings outside his vehicle. Turning his gaze back to the vehicle itself, Richardson’s next thought was one that was totally out of character. “I bet that vehicle has a ton of cash inside it as they’re probably picking up the proceeds these stores took in over the weekend.”

Moments later, after taking note of the time again, this time from a large four-sided clock mounted near the top of a tall decorative tower standing in the middle of the parking lot, Richardson noticed the guard responsible for servicing each of the stores had entered them carrying an empty security bag. Upon exiting each of the stores, even from his vantage point within the gym, the former Army Ranger could tell the guard’s return trip to the armored car was made far slower and much more deliberately due to the weight of the cash and other valuables inside the once empty security bag.

Rubbing his chin with his right hand, Richardson watched as the guard struggled with one of the heavy bags after leaving a Stop & Shop grocery store located several stores off to the left of where he stood inside the gym. “That guy is probably fifty pounds overweight and totally out of shape. That bag he’s lifting into the truck can’t be that heavy,” Richardson thought to himself as he grinned over the difficulty the guard was experiencing.

As he watched the guard finally wrestle the bag into the armored car and then secure the rear door after climbing inside, a devious thought entered Richardson’s mind. It was one most people have considered at least once. “I wonder how many guys it would take to knock off one of these armored cars?”

After pondering this for several seconds, Richardson soon dismissed his thoughts. Turning away from the large windows as the armored car drove past the front of the gym, the six foot three inch former football star turned and walked toward a bank of elliptical machines to begin the next phase of his workout. In another thirty minutes, he would add a strength and flexibility component to his daily workout. It was something he added to his workouts at least twice each week.

Despite the loss of a leg and one eye, as well as having a left hand which no longer worked as well as it once had before the violent explosion he somehow managed to survive, Richardson was still in remarkable physical condition. While he could no longer play football or work as a cop or fireman as he had wanted to do earlier in his life, he was still enough of a physical presence that most men would never dare challenge. Just as it had been on the battlefield, life after the army was also proving to be difficult for the former football star. But as his physical and mental toughness had allowed him to survive one particularly difficult period in his life, that same toughness was helping him deal with a host of other adversities during civilian life.

Now as he worked one of the elliptical machines, another one of Richardson’s best features kicked in. With his previous thoughts about the armored car again running through his brain, he thought about the guard he had seen struggling with the security bag. Carefully, and with the same intensity he was putting into his workout, Jimmy Richardson, the former football star who had served his country so well, began working out the logistics needed to successfully assault an armored car. As he did, he knew doing so would go against everything he and his family had always stood for.