

Continued: Edina native Mike Hurley helped hunt Bin Laden

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WASHINGTON - On the clear September morning when the planes hit the Twin Towers in New York City, Edina native Mike Hurley was working a desk job in the basement of the CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., one of the potential targets of the attacks.

Almost immediately, he decided to join the hunt for Osama bin Laden and volunteered for Afghanistan.

Within months, Hurley found himself in a remote tribal area packing body armor, an M-4 rifle and an Edina High School cap. Outside Gardez, near the border with Pakistan, he was one of 25 Americans representing special forces and the CIA in a ceremony burying part of the steel wreckage.

They consecrated the ground with this prayer: "So that all who seek to do her harm will know that America will not stand by and watch terror prevail. We will export death and violence to the four corners of the earth in defense of our great nation."

The hunt for Bin Laden was on. Hurley would do three classified deployments to Afghanistan and

serve as a senior staffer on the commission that studied the terrorist attacks.

When Bin Laden was shot to death by a Navy SEAL team in Pakistan, Hurley -- now retired -- felt a range of emotions, none of them definitive.

"I didn't feel joy," he recalled recently in his two-story bachelor pad in suburban Virginia. A magazine cover with Bin Laden's face crossed out sat on a wooden coffee table. "I felt a sense that justice had been served. But it was a solemn moment."

Hurley's mind raced back to all the others involved in the hunt, especially the ones who were directly involved in the final stealth operation. In particular, he thought of the seven CIA colleagues who died in Khost, Afghanistan, in 2009, victims of a would-be source who turned out to be a Jordanian suicide bomber.

"It showed the price that people had paid in this effort, and the price people will pay in the future," Hurley said.

Now 56 and retired to a private consulting business, Hurley's satisfaction over Bin Laden's demise is tinged with the certainty that the struggle is not over. "This was something that needed to happen," he said. "But it is going to go on, because the threat is still out there and very severe."

'One long ... tour'

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To say the hunt for Bin Laden was personal to Hurley is only a slight overstatement. He keeps a photo of the World Trade Center given him by the families of the attack's victims. His living room walls are covered with memorabilia of the hunt, including a confiscated Al-Qaida propaganda poster.

To a significant extent, it occupied the last decade of his career.

"He can tell you he had three tours in Afghanistan," said Fred Morrison, one of Hurley's professors at the University of Minnesota Law School. "I think he had one long, continuous tour in Afghanistan with some leaves at home."

While Hurley and other intelligence officers manned forward fire bases in the desert, recruited friendly Afghan militia, cultivated contacts and made sure they had all the "lethal aid" U.S. money could buy, life went on at home.

One of 10 children in an Irish-Catholic family deeply rooted in northeast Minneapolis, Hurley missed a succession of baptisms, birthdays, communions and hockey games. He nearly got married a couple of times, but never did.

"I wasn't present for the day-to-day things that families celebrate," he said. "You lack that sense of belonging to a place." Which is why he often sported a cap emblazoned with the name of his hometown in Minnesota.

He was called back from his second deployment in

Afghanistan after the death of his 78-year-old father, a World War II navy veteran.

What Hurley got in return was a chance to live history.

"He wanted to do public service," said U.S. District Judge John Tunheim, a law school classmate. "After several years at a law firm, that seemed to whet his appetite for public service even more."

One of Hurley's mentors was David Kieft, a University of Minnesota history professor who encouraged him to engage in the broader world. "He was very serious, single-minded and dedicated," Kieft recalled.

In the first weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks, with the Twin Towers still smoldering, Hurley heard from some of his law school buddies. They knew where he worked, if not exactly what he did.

"A couple of them said, 'We would pay our own salaries to be able to do what you have the possibility of doing.' What they meant was being involved in some way," he said. "I had the chance to be involved in some way, and I really felt like I was representing my family, my dad and my mom."

Keyhole of history

When the final 9/11 Commission report was released to wide acclaim, one of Hurley's brothers in Minnesota celebrated by sending him a six-pack of Grain Belt Premium beer.

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"I was just one of thousands of people who participated from many different directions," Hurley said. "But you get a chance to observe through the keyhole of history and participate in a small way, and that is important."

Hurley says he was "not there to be Rambo." Amid the secrecy surrounding much of what he did overseas, he prefers to talk about the role he played afterward, as a top staffer on the 9/11 Commission that analyzed the role of the U.S. intelligence apparatus.

It was a job for which Hurley was uniquely suited, having done stints in the National Security Council, the White House and in Kosovo and Bosnia, where he picked up his first war zone credentials.

He had been scheduled to fly on an Air Force plane that crashed in Croatia in 1996, killing U.S. Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and 34 others, including a couple of Hurley's friends.

But all that was before the hunt, when Islamic extremism was just popping up on America's radar. Hurley likes to think that the 9/11 Commission report, which became a best-seller, helped refine the hunt.

Though he chafed at desk jobs, he said, "I wanted to know what happened and why it happened. I wanted to get the big picture."

Kevin Diaz is a correspondent in the Star Tribune Washington Bureau.

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