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Two Wars: One Hero's Fight on Two Fronts—Abroad and Within

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*To the men who fought on Takur Ghar,
to the families and friends who love them,
and to the One who stands ready to rescue us all,
no matter how high the climb.*







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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Dear Reader:

The story you are about to read is true. The events depicted include violence and vulgar language of a kind that typically doesn't appear in books we publish. But after careful consideration, we decided to include some dialogue that, though potentially offensive, is historically accurate, helps to capture in an authentic way the intensity of the events, and gives a truthful illustration of the human condition, including our brokenness and need for redemption. In this way, we believe our decision is consistent with the biblical principle of showing life as it truly is, without attempting to whitewash human nature.

*When a warrior fights not for himself,
but for his brothers,
when his most passionately sought goal is neither glory
nor his own life's preservation,
but to spend his substance for them, his comrades,
not to abandon them, not to prove unworthy of them,
then his heart truly has achieved contempt for death,
and with that he transcends himself
and his actions touch the sublime.*



STEVEN PRESSFIELD

Gates of Fire

PROLOGUE

My grandfather, the only military man in my bloodline, had served in Normandy after the initial Allied invasion of France. After the war, he turned into a gambling, abusive alcoholic, abandoning my grandmother with three children. My mother was the youngest, three years old when he left. The first time I saw him was at his funeral.

When I was a kid, my grandmother gave me a tattered black book that captured my attention. The book told of a great story, one that I read three times before I was a teenager, one that stirred me somewhere deep inside, in the space between my heart and spine. The book told of American fighting men who floated down from aircraft and stormed the beaches of Normandy from landing craft on June 6, 1944, to meet the world's enemy on D-Day, on what would become known as The Longest Day.

Before I read a word of the text, the black-and-white pictures showed me the core of the message—one I could not explain but intuitively knew. I felt somehow connected to the men in my book. I could feel the tossing of the waves as in my mind I looked down the ramp of the assault landing craft with the heights of Vierville looming ahead, just minutes before H-Hour. I gazed at the blurry H-Hour photo of an American soldier neck-deep in the surf off Omaha Beach until I could feel my pulse throbbing in my neck. I stared at the photo of American soldiers lying limp on the beach, with others moving beyond. I imagined myself walking up to the eight dead paratroopers lined up outside their crashed glider, so I could see their faces.

That tattered black book was the only war story I had ever known.

**04 0612 MAR 02 (DELTA)
SOMEWHERE OVER AFGHANISTAN**

I feel like I'm about to vomit.

Our helicopter careens around the snow-covered mountain, banking hard right, looking for our target. Though it's just before dawn in Afghanistan, the sky is dark, clear, and cold.

"Where's this landing zone?"

"On top of a ten-thousand-foot mountain," says a voice on the radio.

"Roger."

We're on a rescue mission, and I'm in command of a thirteen-man Quick Reaction Force (QRF). We're searching for a missing American who fell out of a helicopter in enemy territory two hours ago. He is somewhere below us in the Shah-i-Khot Valley, an area teeming with hundreds of al-Qaeda fighters. Right now, there's no place on earth more hostile to U.S. soldiers—and no place my team would rather be. We're here because we're Rangers, and we have a creed to uphold: *Never leave a fallen comrade*.

It's 6:12 a.m. The eight-man flight crew is not under my command, but they share my resolve. Every member of the flight crew is alert, scanning the terrain beneath the aircraft. They've been awake for more than thirty-six hours flying missions in their double-rotor Special Ops helicopter. These are the men of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), the "Night Stalkers." They're the best in the world. They fly an MH-47E Chinook, which looks like a black school bus crowned with two spinning telephone poles. I watch them balance against the pilot's evasive nap-of-the-earth flight techniques—it's possibly the only nonlethal example of their experience and skill. We've flown together many times before, both here and in the States. According to their motto, the Night Stalkers Don't Quit. I've been around them enough to know that those aren't mere words.

"I don't see it. That can't be it. On top of *that*? Ask him again."

"Toolbox, this is Razor Zero-One; say again grid; over." No answer.

With no seats in the aircraft, I am sitting on the slick metal floor. I pull a wrinkled map out of my thigh pocket to check the target coordinates. Though I remember writing the digits in tidy block letters at our headquarters in Bagram, the bouncing of the aircraft reduces them to a shimmy of ink. My eyes feel like they're being tossed around inside my head. I can't decipher a single number.

"Try Razor Zero-Two." The other half of our QRF. "Maybe they got it."

"I tried. We've lost radio contact with them."

I look past the other Rangers and out the open ramp, a gaping hole in the back of the aircraft. I survey the pearling expanse for a sign of our trail bird, the landscape behind the aircraft blurred through the oily smudges of exhaust fumes. The last time I checked, the other helicopter was following us, mimicking our every movement, but now I see nothing but flour-white mountains, jagged and ominous.

Knowing what's been happening among these peaks for the last two days demands respect—we're entering the sanctum of warfare. It's our nation's freshest battlefield, where American infantrymen have been clashing with al-Qaeda fighters and struggling against the vicious terrain for the last fifty hours as part of Operation Anaconda. As I prepare to join them, two faces flash in my mind: my wife's and our four-month-old son's. I yearn to tell them I love them. They're sleeping on the other side of the world, unaware of my situation. Even if I could talk to them now, I wouldn't tell them what I'm doing. Right now my eyes are on my Rangers, these fathers of other sons, these sons of other fathers, who depend on me as their platoon leader. And I'm certain their eyes are on me.

Proud to be Rangers, we know their history—our history—by heart. Our Ranger forefathers led the way: June 6 at the cliffs of Pointe-du-Hoc and the surf of Omaha Beach; April 24 in Iran's Dasht-e Kavir desert; October 25 on the Point Salines Airfield in Grenada; December 20 at Noriega's compound in Panama; October 3 in the streets of Mogadishu. Today, it's March 4 in the Shah-i-Khot Valley, and now it's our turn. Combat is near—I can taste it.

Across from me in the cabin, now filling with the soft gray that precedes the sunrise, an Air Force pararescue jumper, or "PJ," removes the night-vision goggles mounted on his helmet and stows them in his medical aid bag. I look around to see the others removing their goggles and making final adjustments—tightening chin straps, ensuring they have rounds chambered, adjusting body armor, checking their weapons' optics.

Moral shorthand equates darkness with evil, but here in the sphere of combat, we hold the darkness sacred. We invade the blackness with our goggles, lasers, and infrared sights. As special operators, we welcome the nightfall; its shadows are our foxholes. But as we circle the mountain, the sun's arrival is imminent, and with it, a reprieve for the enemy. Whatever this mission requires of us, we'll accomplish it without the advantage of our night training and technology.

I do nothing to my equipment. I'm thinking of finding our man. Circling the mountain, I feel a tinge of anxiety thinking of the scenarios that could develop soon—but when I hold out my hand, it's steady. I'm no longer nauseated.

"Okay. We're taking it. Thirty seconds," the pilot says.

"Thirty seconds!" The crew chiefs hold up a thumb and index finger with only an inch in between.

"THIR-TY SECONDS!"

We finish our third orbit of the mountain. Glancing around at

the handful of warriors inside the aircraft, I'm hit by a strange mix of confidence and humility—each of these special men is under my command. In our unit, we don't wear markings or nametags. We don't need them, anyway, in such a tight team. Despite our coverings of body armor, weapons, and gear, we recognize each other by the way we hold our rifles, by the way we dive for cover, by the way we move in the shadows.

One by one I meet their gazes, nodding in acknowledgment or encouragement. I squeeze the knotted shoulder of the man next to me. Each Ranger is a precious military asset—lethal, but fragile in the flesh. Our country has spent several hundred thousand dollars training our bodies and minds, and most of the investment lies in the latter. We can do things with our hands and weapons better than anyone—kill with any weapon from any position with either hand, or kill with *only* our hands—and yet hours before, several of us sat in Bible study, exploring and discussing the Psalms. It's such a strange reconciliation—the life of the warrior with the life of the faithful. And we *are* warriors.

The pilot's voice comes over the intercom system: "Here we go."

I squint at nothing and lose my breath as the fifty-two-foot war machine levels, the whopping of its blades indicating our descent. Every shooter on board crouches rearward, thighs burning, anticipating touchdown. It's exactly 6:14 a.m.

"Team leader off," I say. I unplug my headset's cable from the aircraft's intercom system. According to our procedure, none of us are to unhook our safety lines from the floor's D rings until the aircraft is settled on the ground, but I choose not to follow procedure. Once we hit the ground, I want nothing slowing me down.

The aircraft bucks, flaring to land in the snow. Its engines howl as the grainy snow flushes through the windows and ramp. The icy air shocks my lungs and adrenalizes my body. My vision blurs as the

bird begins to vibrate. This is it: we are here to get our man out, wherever he is. I shut my eyes, waiting to feel the wheels hit the ground.

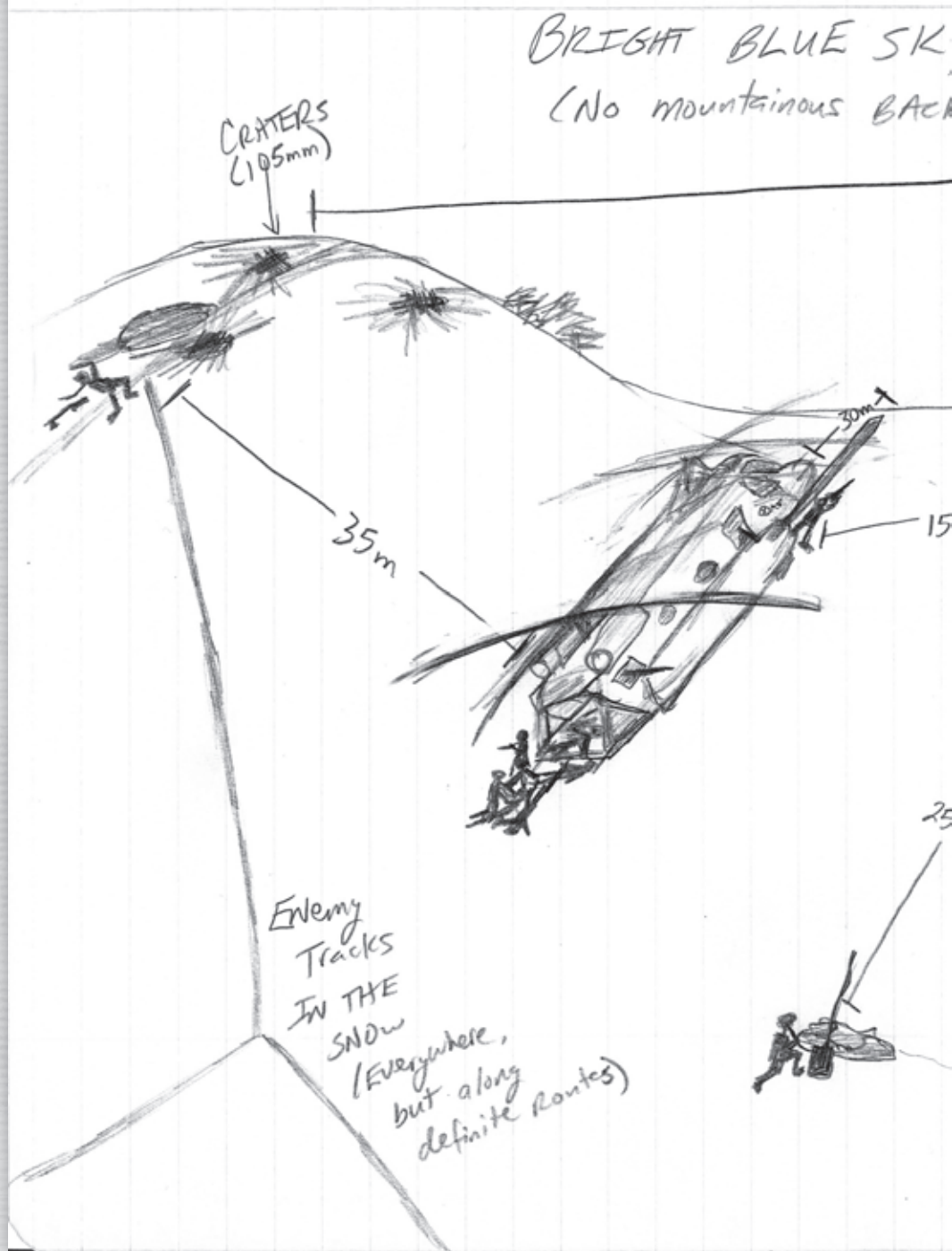
The right door gunner spots something below him: a dirty man in a ski jacket and plastic shoes has a rocket-propelled grenade launcher aimed at us.

“I’ve got an RPG—one o’clock! Three o’clock! Engaging!” The door gunner leans into his minigun’s trigger.

The M134 Gatling gun belches, accompanied by three rounds from the aircraft’s M60 machine gun in the rear. Their tandem fury jolts me. The machine guns riddle the Arab’s body, pinning him against a boulder, but not before he launches the RPG. Our gunners are too late.

I hear the air tearing as the rocket-propelled grenade screams toward us. The detonating shaped charge rips into the aircraft’s right engine, jolting the helicopter. A second RPG pierces the windshield glass, detonating inside and spraying hot metal throughout the cockpit. The helicopter falls with a queasy rush. In an instant, nearly fifty thousand pounds of rubber, steel, and American flesh crash to the earth.





Sketch of the battle details by Captain Nate Self

Y
(DROP)

100 m

Boulder

(Enemy
Bunkers
Under
Trees)

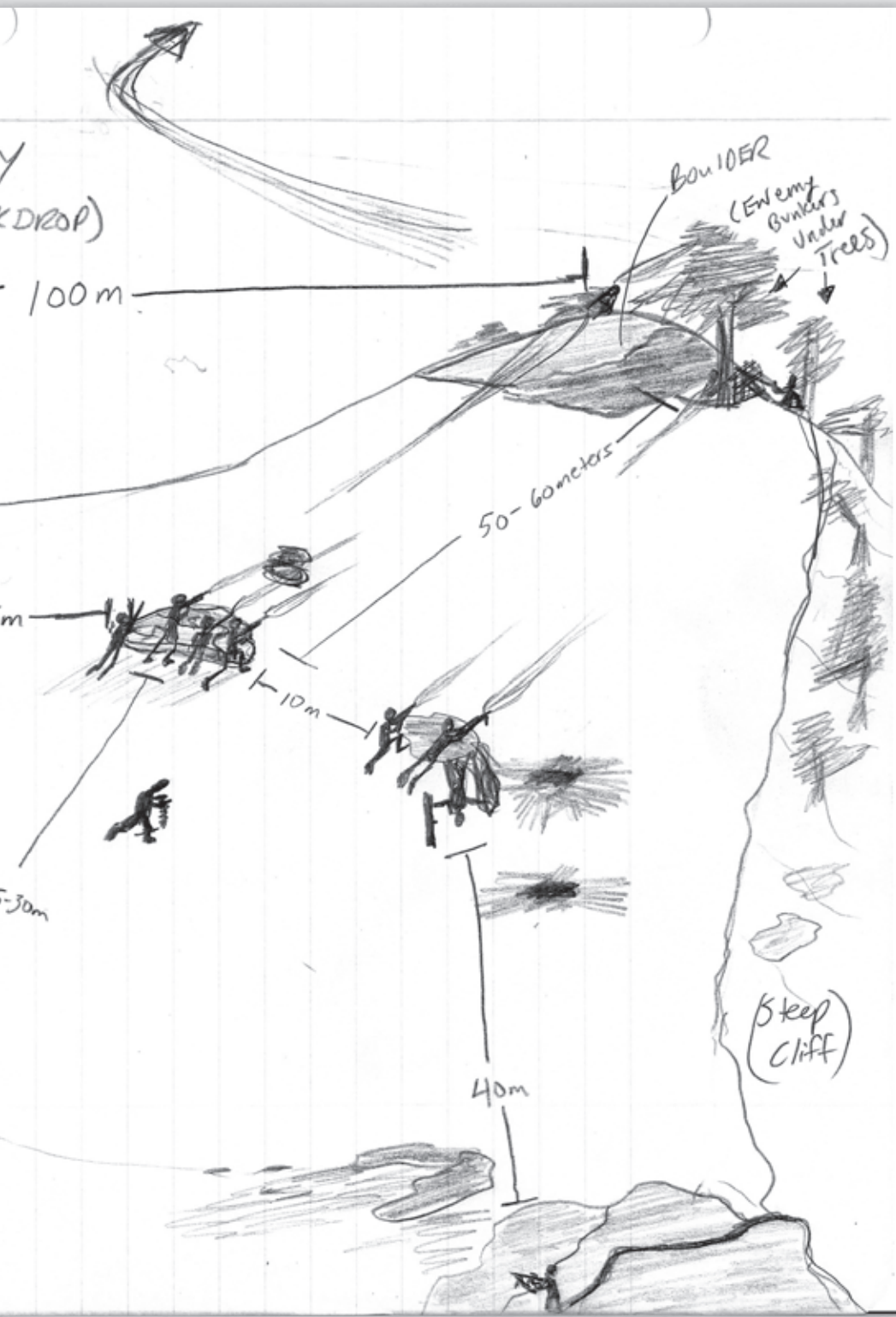
50-60 meters

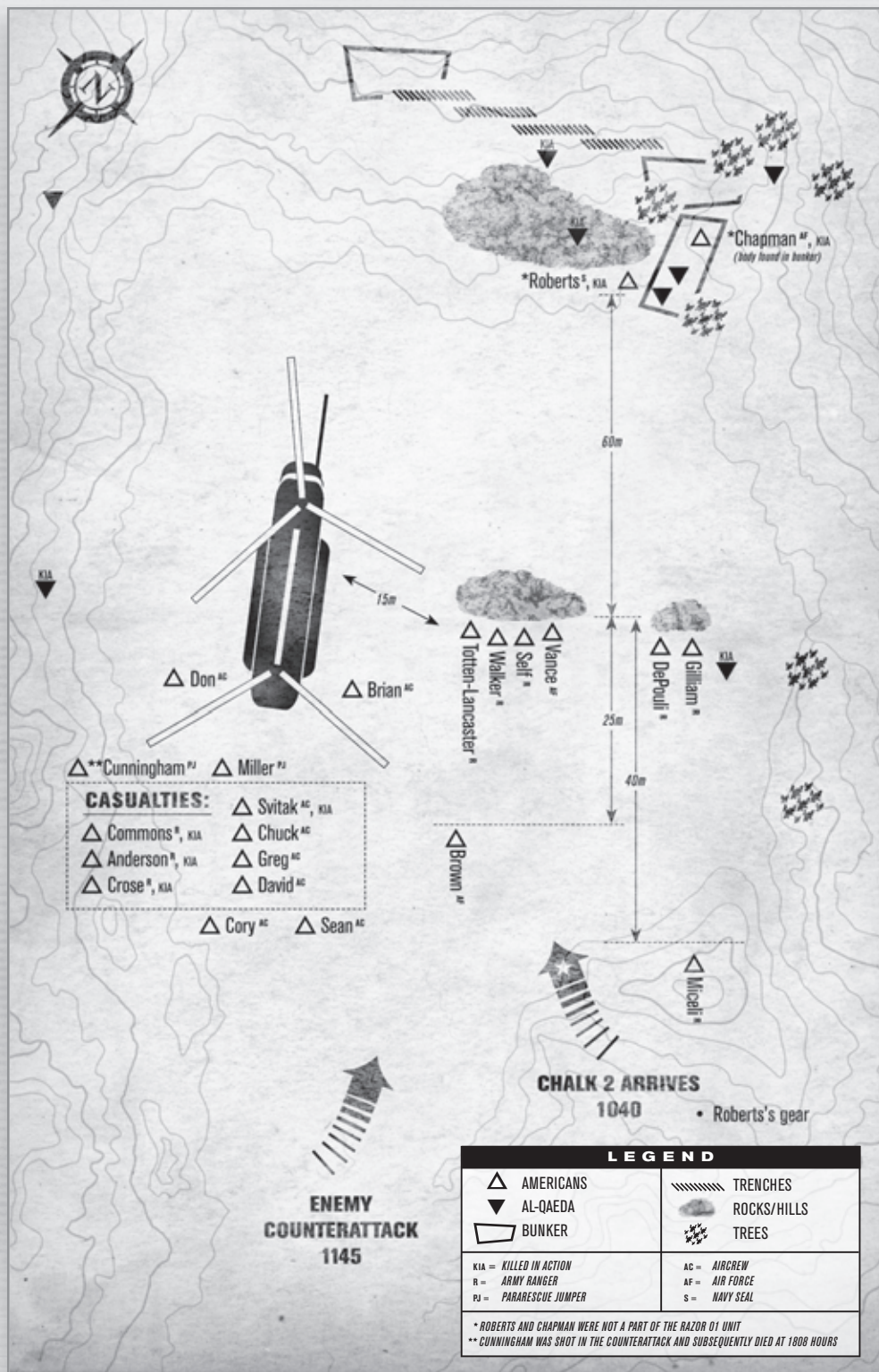
10 m

30 m

40 m

(Steep
Cliff)





Razor 01 battle scenario approximately 0730



PART ONE

[illegible]



THE CALL



1

That's what it takes to be a hero, a little gem of innocence inside you that makes you want to believe that there still exists a right and wrong, that decency will somehow triumph in the end. :: LISE HAND

FEBRUARY 14, 1993
CHINA SPRING, TEXAS

I was eager for church to conclude so I could grab lunch and run a few errands. I still needed to buy a Valentine's Day gift and card for my new girlfriend, Julie Wenzel. We had been dating for a couple of months. She was a year younger at age fifteen—a skinny blonde as tall as me, with a captivating presence and sparkling blue gray eyes as inviting as a dip in the pool. We had planned an early dinner for Valentine's, and I looked forward to seeing her as soon as I could.

The pastor closed with a benediction, and I bolted to my baby blue '65 Chevy pickup in the back of the gravel parking lot. I loved shifting through that three-speed-in-the-floor V8 305 engine with the Eagles in the tape deck, and on the way home I imagined Julie sitting next to me with the gears at her feet, holding my arm through the bends in the road to keep herself from sliding across the vinyl bench seat.

Stop signs were optional along the empty country roads to our house in China Spring, Texas—population fifteen hundred. As I pulled into our gravel driveway at home, I stopped to pick up yesterday's mail, which included the normal bevy of postcards and mailers from universities wooing high school juniors like me. A heavy, full-color catalog was wrapped around it all, a catalog that I had ordered from the most intriguing school on my list: West Point.

I went inside to the table with my sister and parents. But I had trouble paying attention to them as I thumbed through the literature.

"You seem to be into that," my mother said.

"Did you see this place?" I asked. I turned the catalog around for her to see the cover photo of massive gray granite buildings in front of an emerald parade field.

"Looks like a pretty place," she said. "Is that a school?"

"Well, yeah, it's a school, but in the military," I said. "West Point. It's the college for the Army."

"I thought you said you weren't interested in the Army."

"I said I wasn't interested in joining the Army through a recruiter. This is different."

"Whatever happened to being an eye doctor?" she asked. I didn't reply, continuing to flip through the pages.

"I'm fine with you dressing up and playing army as a kid, but not as a man."

"What's wrong with the military?" I asked.

"I just don't like it," she said. "You could get hurt."

"Being in the Army doesn't mean someone's shooting at you. They have doctors, too," I said. "Think about how much money it takes to get through medical school and set up a practice."

"Well, some things aren't worth the money," she said.

"Momma, I'm just looking into it. The Army seems like a boring life, anyway."

I left the table, went to my room, and placed the West Point catalog on my dresser. Growing up during the cold war, I really *had* seen the Army as boring. But what interested me about West Point wasn't the free education, or the free ticket to becoming a doctor, or even really the Army. West Point drew me in a romantic sort of way.

Maybe part of me wanted to try something I wasn't sure I could do. Maybe part of me wanted to be a part of that history, to walk the

same path as Eisenhower and Bradley and so many others. Maybe part of me wanted to find out why I felt connected to the men in that tattered black book, why my chest got hot when I read their story.

2

**FEBRUARY 26, 1993
NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

Six months ago, Ramzi Yousef departed a mujahideen training camp in eastern Afghanistan en route to New York City. He had devised a plot to attack the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan—to strike at the roots of one of the Twin Towers, to send one weakened tower crashing into the other, to kill 250,000 Americans in one day. At last, that day had come.

Airborne snowflakes drifted under the shadows of the towers as Yousef slithered away—down Church Street or Liberty Street, or maybe somewhere to the east. Perhaps he took the Holland Tunnel under the Hudson River to his New Jersey home. Perhaps he crossed the Brooklyn Bridge to the Al-Farooq Mosque two miles away, where mujahideen leaders had raised funds and recruited jihadists in cooperation with the CIA over the past decade. Perhaps he drove to the airport to leave the United States. His direction of travel was less important than where he had been and what he had left behind, parked two levels below grade of the World Trade Center in garage B2: a yellow Ryder Econoline van filled with fifteen hundred pounds of urea nitrate explosives, built and fused by men trained for war against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Across Liberty Street from the World Trade Center, two companies of New York firefighters prepared lunch in a discreet gray brick firehouse known as Ten House. This red-doored corner garage held

the men of Engine Company 10 and Ladder Company 10—men who were responsible for Lower Manhattan’s Twin Towers, men whose logo emblem depicted a caricatured firefighter standing atop the Twin Towers engulfed in flames. These men came to work at Ten House knowing they were always “a ladder rung from death” as they protected the epicenter of the world’s financial markets, the symbol of American economic strength.

At eighteen minutes past noon, the men at Ten House felt a rumble as the yellow Ryder van exploded in the belly of the World Trade Center. The blast jawed a crater through seven foundational layers. The firefighters rushed into the street, where thick black smoke pumped into the frigid winter air from the tower’s crumpled basement garage doors.

The blast cut electrical power in the complex, leaving more than fifty thousand people in the dark, in suspended elevator cars, and in crowded stairwells as smoke billowed inside the towers, now 110-story chimneys.

The men of Ten House were the first to the scene, and they performed heroically in the basement of the complex, sawing through doors and picking through flames and rubble to reach people trapped, dead and alive, in the bomb crater. Over the next several hours, more than 45 percent of the city’s firefighters joined Ten House to evacuate both towers. It was the largest incident in the department’s 128-year history.

Six Americans died in the attack, and more than a thousand were injured. But despite the relatively low number of casualties—the bombers intended to kill a quarter-million people that day—all was not well. One survivor’s description of the bomb blast would seem eerily prophetic eight and a half years later: “It felt like an airplane hit the building.”

AN ARMY WIFE'S PERSPECTIVE

by Julie Self

A lot has changed since 1992, since that first time butterflies filled my stomach when Nathan Self invited me over to watch a movie at his house. As a naive fifteen-year-old, I could not have imagined that our innocent puppy love would grow into a deep, abiding faith in each other, a commitment so strong that no amount of loneliness, war, or hurt could ever separate us. Fifteen years after that first date, I see that God has been the key to our life together.

Army marriages are not easy, and ours was no exception. We spent our first married year separated by schooling commitments. Once we were together, I still spent time alone, with his weeks in the field, early mornings and late nights, and three deployments. But despite our personal desire to spend more time together, we loved serving our country. We had fallen in love with the Army and with the American Soldier.

Just more than a month after 9/11, Nathan and I welcomed our first child, Caleb, into the world. I fell in love again with Nathan—this time as my son's father, not just as my husband. I'll never forget seeing Nathan hold Caleb for the first time in the hospital rocking chair and feeling overwhelmed with gratitude.

Nathan deployed to war in Afghanistan two days after we quietly celebrated our first Christmas as parents. I had more worries and fears on this deployment than on the previous one, to Kosovo. It was war, and I had a baby to take care of. During the many late-night hours of nursing a newborn, I prayed for Nathan's safety and well-being. With a new war a few days old, he and I had worried about bringing a child into such an uncertain world when Caleb was born, but now I saw that God had given me an additional gift—a

piece of Nathan to hold while he was away. And I learned to hold on to God more and more.

I discovered during our time apart that when I had been fortunate enough to have Nathan with me every day, it was easy to take his presence for granted. I hadn't told him the things I most deeply needed or wanted to tell him. But when Nathan was overseas, we communicated through e-mail, letters, and occasional phone calls, and there was no holding back. We were clear and up-front about our fears in life and our feelings for each other. During these times, I found the same to be true with my relationship with God. I relied on him in all my fears, doubts, loneliness—everything. And every time the Lord brought Nathan home to me, I wanted to continue that feeling of “no holding back,” that wonderful, vulnerable dependence we had developed when we were apart.

But the aftermath of war brought challenging and difficult times at home. After Nathan came home for good, he started to really experience the emotional effects of having been in war—something that neither of us saw coming. He never talked with me about his deployed experiences. He withdrew from me and, somehow, from himself. It was heartbreaking. Nathan had always been so strong. To see him at a breaking point—to see anyone I loved in pain—was not easy. Where was the Nathan I had married? I wanted the problems to disappear and be fixed right away. I wanted to fix them myself. But I couldn't.

At times, we were desperate. But in our desperation, we sought the Lord—and he was there. We got on our knees at night and simply laid ourselves and our feelings before God. We asked for his help. We looked for answers in the Bible. We also journaled to each other regularly and worked through our feelings that way. We were vulnerable, and we communicated our hurts and frustrations. We learned to forgive both ourselves and each other. By God's grace and mercy, we were able to heal.

God never promised an easy life free of trials and tribulations. He did, however, say that he would never leave us or forsake us. It is during these difficult times that we can become the people God wants us to be. When faced with such challenging events in this life, we have a choice. We can become bitter, resentful, or angry and eventually give up or run away. Or we can choose to be obedient: to love unconditionally, to forgive, and to heal.

Much has changed for us. We are no longer in the Army, and war has altered us, as it has for so many others, in ways that cannot be ignored. At times, I didn't want to go through any of it; I didn't care whether God had a purpose in all of it; I said, "No, God, this is not what I asked for." There was a time when I rejected the changes, when I just wanted my old life back. But I've seen God bringing about even greater changes in me. I've reached a point where I see that it's possible to be joyful even in the midst of trials, in knowing that God is in control. I've reached a point where I love my soldier without qualification—regardless of his wounds, whether seen or unseen. And I love him, regardless of the ways he may have wounded me. I have felt the joy of knowing that even though circumstances change and people change, God stays the same.

Scripture says that "God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them" (Romans 8:28, NLT). Nathan and I look back now and see that during those dark days, we were being drawn to God. He truly did cause our struggles to work together for our good—for the good of our relationship with him and for the good of our marriage.

God has since blessed us with two more beautiful children. Nathan and I are excited that we can one day share our story with them, in hope that they, too, will choose to follow Jesus even

through struggles and pain, for he is the solution to our struggles and the ultimate Healer of our pain.

Nathan, I am blessed to be called your bride. I thank you for the love, devotion, strength, and tenderness you give to our family. I look forward to growing old with you, and . . . you still give me butterflies.

AFTERWORD

by Stu Weber

“To those who have fought for it, freedom has a flavor the protected can never know.”

I’m not sure who made that statement, but it rings true. That’s the bright side of soldiering, the good news—a quiet gratitude for life, lodged deep within a soldier’s soul. Beauty, innocence, peace, family, faith, and the simple joys of life possess an extra measure of fragrance and flavor for those who have risked everything to defend them.

But soldiering has a dark side, too.

The old Negro spiritual says it well: “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.” Many servicemen and women who have logged time in combat would say the same thing. *Nobody knows. Nobody gets it. Nobody has any idea what it’s like.*

Nobody, that is, except another soldier.

Where there is a battle, there are wounds, and where there are wounds, there are scars—scars of the body and scars of the soul. In one sense, this is the story of every soldier who has lived through the shock and violence of combat. At some point in the last fifty years or so, the long-term effects of such battles acquired a label. You’ve probably heard it kicked around at one time or another: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.

Anyone who knows me knows I love soldiers. As a former soldier myself, I always have and I always will. And nothing pleases old soldiers like watching the next generation of youngsters step up to the line to defend their country. Today, I see a generation of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines as skilled, courageous, and dedicated as any this nation has ever known. And they are literally standing between us and all that would destroy us and our way of life.

They pay a heavy price. Some pay the last full measure and give their lives for us. Others are wounded, some severely so. Still others escape without physical wounds. But not one is untouched. And not one returns from combat the same person who entered it.

Nate Self and his platoon of brothers acquitted themselves with valor, honor, and sacrifice on as harsh a battlefield as you can imagine. But the story is not yet complete. The “journey back” to life and living, after staring death and dying in the face, is a long one. Though he is no longer deployed with the Army, Nate in a very real sense is still making his way home. Home to hope and family, to love and purpose, to trust in others and faith in God.

I have an especially deep regard for Nate Self. I like to think of him in the way he once referred to himself—as my “Texas son.”

In the spring of 2002, I began devouring stories coming out of the conflict in Afghanistan. My heart was especially drawn to the superb work of our Special Forces troopers and our Rangers. In particular, a desolate patch of high-altitude real estate called Takur Ghar held my attention. Whisked into a fierce firefight to rescue a Navy SEAL who had fallen out of the back of his helicopter, these men had stared “the elephant” of combat square in the eye.

My heart was with them. I could feel it.

The battle that Nate and his platoon fought may very well have been one of the longest single firefights in our Global War on Terror. And it may hold yet another distinction—as the only infantry battle in our nation’s history fought at or above ten thousand feet.

I first met Nate Self in March 2003, about a year after his baptism on that mountaintop of ice and fire. I had taught a seminar and had spo-

ken at a chapel service at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. After the service, a strapping young captain, the epitome of America's finest and a student in the Army's Combined Arms Staff Services School, approached me. From the moment we began conversing, I sensed a palpable depth in the man. After a few minutes, in almost a whisper, he said, "I was the platoon leader of the QRF on Takur Ghar a year ago."

It took my breath away! I wanted to probe but held myself back. I knew he'd been through the most soul-stretching experience a man can face. So I walked carefully into our conversation, not wanting to hurt or embarrass this American hero in any way. I didn't want to go where he didn't want to go. I felt for him both a sense of awe and an overriding compassion. He had survived the worst that war has to offer—the loss of true friends, fellow soldiers, his brothers.

I went back to Oregon, half a continent away, and Nate deployed to war again, this time to Iraq. Nate and I stayed in touch after the seminar, occasionally talking by phone or e-mailing. Even after he left the Army, we stayed in touch. In one of those conversations, he made an offhand comment that I should have picked up on.

"We're experiencing some family stress because of all this."

Of course, I thought. He's in the wake of it. The aftermath of an experience like that must be devastating. It's been a part of every war, this near cousin to shell shock and battle fatigue. It's always the next big conflict that every combat veteran faces after returning home to civilian life.

I let Nate's comment about "family trouble" slip by, not knowing what to do with it. Did he want feedback? Was this a call for help? Should I, as a pastor and friend, have simply waded in? Because I didn't hear a direct invitation to get involved, I held back. I was more worried about wounding this young warrior's pride than responding to a need I understood all too well. Over time, I would

learn that pride—the unhealthy kind that turns help away—was not an issue for Nate Self.

Along the way, Nate sent an e-mail that said very simply, with no fanfare, “By the way, Stu, NBC’s *Dateline* is doing a special on Takur Ghar on June 11.” I marked that date on my calendar and made sure I wouldn’t be disturbed on the night it aired.

For me, the program was riveting. It was an account of that brutal, heartbreaking battle on Takur Ghar—but that’s not where it stopped. The program went on to probe deeper into the hearts of Nate and Julie Self. Here was a young American soldier and his wife dealing with the burden of a deadly fight that had been won on the other side of the world but had come home to Texas to be fought in a different way.

My heart ached for them. I had to talk to Nate. I wanted to get them away from this broken world—if only for a day or two. I wanted that magnificent woman, Julie, to find her man again. I wanted them to experience some kind of oasis in the emotional desert of these overpowering post-traumatic storms. Just as Nate and his men had refused to leave that SEAL alone to fight his own battle, I could not bear the thought of Nate and Julie having to fight this second war alone.

The soldier’s core value of leaving no man behind pulled hard at me. But I was half a continent away, tied up with a million details as pastor of a large church. How could I become meaningfully involved in this couple’s life?

Then a thought struck me. It seemed crazy at first, but once it had occurred to me, I couldn’t put it out of my mind. My wife, Linda, and I have access to a tiny log cabin in the Willowa Mountains of northeast Oregon. It was built after World War II by a young veteran who came home from the war and lived there with his wife for half a century. Perhaps it could serve, at least for a few days, as a

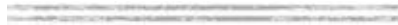
respite for another battle-weary soldier and his equally weary wife. I thought maybe Linda and I could at least briefly wrap our arms around this young couple who were paying a price for serving our nation and its freedom.

My mind went to Elijah and how God, in a time of trouble, had hidden his prophet away in a secret little ravine in Israel's back country. *Kerith* was the name of the small stream and valley that became a refuge for some of the most prominent men in Scripture, including Jacob, David, and Elijah. God had led his man to a sheltered valley and given him a brief season of quiet, refreshment, provision, and rest after a nearly impossible assignment.

While enemies raged, armies searched, kingdoms rose and fell, and the world turned, the shell-shocked prophet found refuge in a secluded spot. It was just a little wrinkle in the landscape, a tiny corner of the world, tucked away from sight, hidden by the shadow of the Almighty.

Could Nate and his wife benefit from a little time in such a hideaway? There is no brook *Kerith* in Oregon . . . but maybe the banks of Bear Creek would do.

Well, maybe it was crazy and maybe it wasn't. But this time, I wasn't going to hang back. I picked up the phone and dialed Nate's number.



I called Nate to simply express my love for him and Julie. And I invited them to take a minivacation and visit us in Oregon . . . escaping to our rustic little retreat in the Wallowa Mountains.

And they said yes.

When Nate and Julie flew in to Portland on a Friday evening, Linda and I instantly fell in love with them. We felt as if we were meeting our own adult children for the first time. We took them to

our favorite seafood restaurant on the banks of the wide Columbia River and talked nonstop for hours.

On Sunday, we went to church together, and then packed up the Ford pickup and headed out toward the northeast corner of Oregon. Our refuge alongside Bear “Crik” was only a few hours away. After stopping for a bite of dinner in one of the tiny towns along the way, we drove through the river canyon into the glory of the Wallowa Valley in winter, where the little cabin awaited us, huddled against the Hayes Canyon hillside.

After settling in, Nate and I stepped outside in the fading daylight to steal a quick look across the meadow at Bear Creek. Snow had begun to fall, laying a soft blanket of white over the landscape. In that quiet interlude on the cabin porch, we talked of soldiers through the generations . . . of old warriors passing the torch to the younger . . . of the human heart, and of hope.

We recalled that God himself deeply loves soldiers. His own Son, in fact, was the ultimate Warrior—shedding his blood, absorbing the enemy’s blows, laying down his life for his friends. *No greater love*. We reflected that this same Jesus—the One of whom it was said “a bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not quench”—will be back one day astride a great warhorse, wearing a bloodstained robe, and carrying a sword.

And we reflected on Nate’s epiphany in Afghanistan, that he had not only a story to tell but also a message to steward: that a man today, like so many prominent men in the Bible, can be both a physical warrior and a spiritual warrior at the same time. That the two are not exclusive. That neither compromises the other.

We glanced through the cabin window at Julie seated on the couch inside, talking to Linda. It struck me that this wonderful woman would follow her husband through anything.

Nate and I slipped back inside, and the four of us watched the

Dateline special again, from start to finish, interjecting conversation along the way . . . and taking some deep breaths together.

Every combat warrior fights two wars. For the soldier, the sheer shock of combat is traumatic enough, but the anguish of losing his bearings in its wake may prove to be even more troublesome. Eventually, the battlefield falls silent. But its horrible echoes do not. And for the war that follows—the inner war—there is no training. It's like throwing a dime-store compass into a room full of magnets. Where is north? What's up, what's down? It is this loss of direction and basic instincts which most typifies the horror of post-traumatic stress.

Though the post-combat soldier may appear to be fully alive to those around him, something inside of him has died. The life he lived and the man he thought he was seem more like mirages than reality. How does he make decisions or move forward when he can't even grapple with his present location? It's a scary thing to be lost in the woods; it's much more terrifying to be lost inside yourself.

Nothing is normal anymore. And “normal” people who have no experience of similar trauma themselves can only stand back, it seems, and question the soldier's sanity. As the inner disorientation compounds itself, a dizzying downward spiral accelerates. And sometimes it erupts in sudden and irrational anger.

Where did that thought come from? Did I just say that? Why did I just do that? Where is this coming from?

Some have described it as a perpetually shuffling deck of cards. Just when the soldier thinks he's got a hand he can play, something or someone scrambles the deck.

Flashbacks. Confusion. Depression. Anxiety. Anger.

My friend Gary Beikirch, a Green Beret Medal of Honor recipient in Vietnam, says that the memories of the initial war blend into

the second war. “Life,” he says, “feels like a never-ending game of fifty-two-card pickup.”

It’s as if every combat soldier lives with a hole in his heart. And though that hole is survivable, it seems to draw the soldier away from others and into a lonely place of isolation. It is this growing sense of aloneness that is most destructive.

Rangers leave no man behind. Winning this second war requires the same commitment as the first war—togetherness. The secret to beating post-traumatic stress is not unlike the basic skills of combat patrolling: go slow, and stick together. Friends are what get you through the dark nights. Talking it out—authentic, interpersonal communion—may be the best medicine.

As King Solomon writes, “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24, NIV). Among all our acquaintances and associates, one Friend always gets it. When no one else understands, he does. When no one else can sort through the kaleidoscope of chaotic thoughts, he steps in and brings order. When the path ahead seems to wind into darkness, he takes the point and leads the way.

Jesus Christ, who knows more about war and death than any of us will ever experience, is that ultimate Friend. And he will leave no one with a thirsty heart behind.

GLOSSARY

AC-130 gunship

Heavily armed ground support gunship version of the C-130 Hercules. [ADDR]

Apache

AH-64 helicopter, a rotary-wing, armed attack aircraft. [ADDR]

Army mules

Mascots of the U.S. Military Academy. At the time of this story, they were Ranger, Trooper, Traveler, and Spartacus.

attack heading

The interceptor heading during the attack phase that will achieve the desired track crossing angle. Also, the assigned magnetic compass heading to be flown by aircraft during the delivery phase of an air strike. [JP]

back plate

Plate armor protecting a soldier's back.

Beast Barracks (Beast)

An intensive six-and-a-half week training program for new cadets at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York.

berm

An artificial ledge or shoulder of ground; built to deflect fire. [ADDR]

Blackhawk

In this case, MH-60 helicopter, a rotary-wing, combat assault transport and electronic warfare and target acquisition aircraft. [ADDR]

BMNT

Before morning nautical twilight, the time before sunrise when the center of the sun is between 6° and 12° below the horizon.

Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV)

M2 or M3 tracked infantry fighting vehicle/armored personnel carrier. [ADDR]

Bull Hill

Mountain summit (1,411 feet) in Putnam County, New York, on the U.S. Military Academy reservation.

C-4 explosive

A variety of plastic explosive; common explosive for U.S. forces and the variety used in the bombing of the USS *Cole*.

C-130 Hercules

A fixed-wing, medium-range transport aircraft. [ADDR]

cadet

An officer-in-training. [ADDR]

call sign

An encrypted identification for a given radio-transmitter station. [ADDR]

CamelBak

Brand of portable hydration pack.

Camp Buckner

Eighty-acre site at West Point used for cadet field training. Named after General Simon Bolivar Buckner, the highest-ranking American killed in World War II. General Buckner was killed on the Pacific island of Okinawa while inspecting the fighting there.

Camp Monteith

Base camp established in June 1999 in a former Serbian Army post in Gnjilane, Kosovo, to be used as staging points for the bulk of U.S. forces stationed in the multinational brigade. Named for 1st Lieutenant Jimmie Monteith, posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on D-Day, June 6, 1944. [GS]

CAS (close air support)

Air action by fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft against hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly forces and which require detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces. [JP]

CCT (combat controller)

U.S. Air Force ground combat forces assigned to special tactics joint air and ground forces. The mission of a combat controller is to establish assault zones for aircraft, and provide air traffic control, command and control communications, and terminal attack control. [CCA]

chalk

Designated troops, equipment, and/or cargo that constitute a complete aircraft load. [FM]

chem-light

Chemical light sticks that glow continuously once activated by breaking an internal vial to combine the chemicals.

Chinook

In this case, MH-47 helicopter, a rotary-wing, medium transport aircraft. [ADDR]

Colt .45

Brand of .45 caliber automatic pistol.

Corps of Cadets

More than four thousand men and women who are pursuing an undergraduate education and a commission in the United States Army. At the time of the events of this book, the Corps was organized into thirty-six cadet companies; the companies are grouped into battalions (then, three companies each), regiments (then, three battalions each), and the Corps (four regiments). [USMA]

CP (command post)

The location of a unit's headquarters commander and staff. [ADDR]

CSAR

Combat search and rescue. A mission to locate, communicate with, and recover downed aircrews and isolated personnel. Could also refer to the unit assigned this mission. [FAS]

defilade

Arrangement of fortifications so as to protect the lines from frontal fire or gunfire directed from a flanking position, and the interior from fire from above or behind. [MW]

DZ

Drop zone

exfil (exfiltration)

The surreptitious movement of soldiers out of an enemy-controlled area. [ADDR]

Forward arming and refueling point

A temporary facility to provide fuel and ammunition necessary for the employment of aviation maneuver units in combat, permitting combat aircraft to rapidly refuel and rearm simultaneously. Also called FARP. [JP]

FARP Texaco

Code name of forward arming refueling point (call sign "Texaco") established between Gardez, Afghanistan, and Takur Ghar mountain.

fatwah

A legal opinion or ruling issued by an Islamic scholar.

firebase

A secured site from which small-scale fighting units can stage, support, and sustain their operations.

fire team

The basic infantry fighting unit, consisting of four soldiers with various weapons and support. Two fire teams make up a squad; four squads make up a platoon.

flashbang grenade

A nonlethal, low hazard, non-shrapnel-producing explosive device intended to confuse, disorient, or momentarily distract the enemy. [GS]

flight line

In this case, the line of aircraft parked on the apron of an airfield. In Bagram, the helicopters were parked on an apron constructed of corrugated steel.

forward operating base (FOB)

An airfield used to support tactical operations without establishing full support facilities [DOD]. Also, a secure site within a combat zone that functions as a soldier's "home away from home," giving respite from the rigors of extended deployment.

Garmin GPS

Brand of handheld global-positioning system.

GBU-12 bomb

Guided Bomb Unit, a 500-pound laser-guided general-purpose warhead.

guided-missile destroyer

Multi-mission, fast warships that can operate independently or as part of carrier battle groups. [USN]

guidons

A reference to the military flag, or guidon, carried into battle. Military usage can also refer to the leader of an organization.

H-Hour

The scheduled time for the start of a combat operation.

Hellfire missiles

Air-to-ground tactical guided-missile system, with heavy antiarmor capability. [FAS]

higher headquarters

In this case, a general reference to any unit that has direct operational control over a lower-ranking unit.

HVT (high-value target)

A target the enemy commander requires for the successful completion of the mission. The loss of HVTs would be expected to seriously degrade important enemy functions throughout the friendly commander's area of interest. [JP]

infil (infiltration)

The undetected movement of a small force or of individuals through enemy-held territory. [ADDR]

JDAM

Joint-Direct Attack Munition, a GPS-based guidance kit to provide accurate delivery of general-purpose bombs in adverse weather conditions. [FAS]

JOC

Joint Operations Center, a joint force commander's headquarters that is jointly manned for the planning, monitoring, and execution of the commander's decisions.

JSOC

Joint Special Operations Command, a joint headquarters designed to study Special Operations requirements and techniques; ensure interoperability and equipment standardization; plan and conduct joint Special Operations exercises and training; and develop joint Special Operations tactics. [GS]

Kevlar

Brand of fiber used in lightweight body armor; slang for a military helmet made from Kevlar.

KFOR (Kosovo Force)

NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo.

KIA

Killed in action

Little Bird

Light assault helicopter that provides support to Special Operations forces and can be armed with a combination of guns and folding fin aerial rockets. [FAS] Military nomenclature is AH-6 or MH-6.

LZ

Short for HLZ, or helicopter landing zone, a specified ground area for landing assault helicopters to embark or disembark troops and/or cargo. A landing zone may contain one or more landing sites. [JP]

MAKO

A type of shark; here used as a radio call sign to identify an element of SEAL snipers.

Manifest “Alpha”

One of the many predetermined manifests, or rosters, used by 1st Platoon, 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment to designate who would be a part of a mission. Used to expedite the planning process.

MBITR

Multi-Band Inter/Intra-Team Radio, a rugged, lightweight, handheld radio that offers enhanced interoperability with existing military and commercial radio systems.

medevac

Acronym for *medical evacuation*, an evacuation of casualties concurrent with medical care.

Mercator projection

A mathematical method of showing a map of the globe on a flat surface.

Mi-8 HIP

Soviet multi-role transport helicopter capable of carrying troops or supplies as well as conducting armed attacks with rockets and guns. [FAS]

MRE

Meals Ready to Eat, a totally self-contained complete meal designed to be consumed without cooking or heating. The standard combat rations for the U.S. armed forces.

mujahideen

Coalition of Muslim insurgents who fought against Afghan Army and Soviet forces during the Afghan War of 1978–1992.

NCO

Noncommissioned officer, a subordinate officer (as a sergeant) appointed from among enlisted personnel. [MW]

Night Stalkers

Nickname for 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment of the U.S. Army.

night vision goggles

An electro-optical image-intensifying device that detects visible and near-infrared energy, intensifies the energy, and provides a visible image for night viewing. Can be handheld or helmet-mounted. Also called NVGs. [JP]

OP

Observation post, a position from which military observations are made, or fire directed and adjusted, and which possesses appropriate communications. [DOD]

Operation Anaconda

Combat operation that began March 1, 2002, in the mountainous Shah-i-Khot region south of the city of Gardez in eastern Afghanistan. Operation Anaconda was part of an ongoing effort in Afghanistan to root out Taliban and al-Qaeda forces holed up in Paktia Province. [GS]

PJ

Air Force pararescue jumper; specially trained personnel qualified to penetrate to the site of an incident by land or parachute, render medical aid, accomplish survival methods, and rescue survivors. [JP]

Predator

Unmanned Aerial Vehicle used for reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition. The Predator system was designed to provide constant intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to U.S. strategic and tactical forces. It can also perform a search-and-destroy mission using guided Hellfire missiles. [FAS]

PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. [NIMH]

QRF

Quick Reaction Force, a military force poised to respond on very short notice, with a main mission of establishing security or reconnaissance. [GS]

Ranger tab

A black and yellow cloth shoulder insignia to be worn by soldiers who have successfully completed a Ranger training course.

RPG

Rocket-propelled grenade, a handheld, shoulder-launched antitank weapon capable of firing an unguided rocket equipped with an explosive warhead.

SAW (squad automatic weapon)

M-249 lightweight, gas-operated, portable machine gun capable of delivering a large volume of effective fire. [FAS]

SEAL (SEa, Air, Land)

U.S. Navy special forces.

Skedco litter

Brand of stretcher used in aerial rescue missions.

Special Forces

Highly trained military units that conduct specialized operations such as reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, and counterterrorism.

Special Operations

Use of small units in direct or indirect military actions focused on strategic or operational objectives. They require units with combinations of trained specialized personnel, equipment, and tactics that exceed the routine capabilities of conventional military forces. [GSO]

Stinger missile

Short-range surface-to-air missile system designed for air defense against low-altitude airborne targets, to protect combat forces, forward bases, or high-value targets. [FAS]

TF

Task Force, a temporary unit or formation established to work on a single task or activity.

UAV

Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, remotely piloted or self-piloted aircraft that can carry cameras, sensors, communications equipment, or other payloads. [FAS]

WIA

Wounded in action.

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[CCA] Combat Controllers Association (www.usafccf.com)

[DOD] U.S. Department of Defense

[FAS] Federation of American Scientists (www.fas.org)

[FM] Field Manual 55-9, Unit Air Movement Planning, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., April 5, 1993 (from Section II [Definitions] of the Glossary)

[GS] Global Security (www.globalsecurity.org)

[GSO] Global Special Operations (www.globalspecialoperations.com)

[JP] Joint Publication 3-09.3, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Close Air Support*, September 3, 2003, page ix

[MW] *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, eleventh edition

[NIMH] National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov)

[USMA] United States Military Academy (www.usma.edu)

[USN] U.S. Navy (www.navy.mil)

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The following is a list of sources that have been of use in the writing of this book. This selected bibliography by no means represents the full record of the sources I have consulted but indicates the substance and range of reading that has informed my version of the story. It is my hope that this list will be an aid to those who wish to pursue the study of the Army, the Global War on Terror, the Rangers, and the Battle of Takur Ghar.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NATE SELF graduated from West Point in 1998 as an Infantry officer and led soldiers in Kosovo before being selected to serve in the Army's elite 75th Ranger Regiment.

As a platoon leader in the Rangers, he deployed to Afghanistan shortly after 9/11 as part of a Special Operations task force with the mission to kill or capture Taliban and al-Qaeda's top leaders. Once there, he led his Ranger platoon into the teeth of an al-Qaeda strongpoint to rescue a missing and captured Navy SEAL on top of Takur Ghar mountain, where he earned the Silver Star, Bronze Star, and Purple Heart. His soldier's story has been highlighted recently in the media, and as a result of his actions in Afghanistan, he attended the 2003 State of the Union address.

Following a tour in Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division, where he wrote and directed daily operations and trained Iraqi Security Forces, Nate commanded a rifle company before leaving the Army in 2004 in order to better care for his family. He continues to work with young officers in the Army, focusing on professional development through personal interaction and facilitation of learning via the Army's CompanyCommand and PlatoonLeader online professional forums, where he is able to share his experiences and lessons learned in a public venue. He also spends time speaking to business and churches and interacting with veterans dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Nate lives in Texas with his wife, Julie, and their three children, Caleb, Noah, and Elliot.