

STEVEN ELLIOTT

WAR STORY

*SOMETIMES THE REAL FIGHT
STARTS AFTER THE BATTLE*

Many of us have a war story. A story of struggle, pain, and loss. We leave these battles forever changed, and the wounds we bear may not be easily seen. This is one man's war story. *It's a story of the tragic death of NFL player turned Army Ranger Pat Tillman, told by the soldier who may have killed him.* Of the shooting's aftermath that plunged him into the depths of guilt, shame, and addiction—until unlikely hope emerged. Of a man who began fighting for his country and found himself fighting for his soul.

Praise for War Story

Army Ranger Sergeant Steven Elliott has written one of the most compelling and moving personal narratives on war-stress injury; moral pain; and the long, twisted road to recovery that I have ever read! *War Story* is a must-read for active-duty personnel, veterans, family members, friends of veterans, clergy, healthcare professionals, and mental health clinicians alike.

MARK C. RUSSELL, PhD, ABPP

Commander, US Navy (Ret.)

Steven Elliott is a determined warrior who volunteered to serve his country out of a sense of duty—a sacred obligation he felt was his as an American citizen. This book, *War Story*, recalls a tragic event in one of the world's best-trained and most capable combat units, an American Ranger battalion. More important, Steve courageously shares the deeply personal effects of posttraumatic stress from this combat action that nearly destroyed him and his family. This is an absolute must-read for every professional soldier. *War Story* should make leaders reexamine how the unseen wounds of war are addressed within the Department of Defense!

JAY W. HOOD

Major General, US Army (Ret.)

Steven Elliott's *War Story* includes the final day of combat for Pat Tillman. Steve discovered how hard it is to ask for help in bearing the fog and the wounds war. This book is about courage, facing the past, and winning the future. It is an inspiration to all of us who bore the battle.

CHARLES R. FIGLEY, PhD

Distinguished Chair and Professor and Traumatology Institute Director,
Tulane University, New Orleans

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TYNDALE
MOMENTUM®



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Author's Note

Wars take many shapes and sizes, and the field of battle can be found both without and within. This memoir, *War Story*, represents my attempt to accurately capture the events leading up to, during, and following my time as an Army Ranger in Afghanistan. My deployment in 2004 was brief—a mere six weeks. The time I spent revisiting the battlefield in my mind and experiencing the pains of war was much longer. This is a story of a war that began on foreign soil but followed me home. If this story is worth reading, it is worth reading not because it is unique but precisely because it is ordinary. *War Story* is one of many stories of hope, pain, and loss that leave us with questions. Why do we choose to fight for any country or any cause, military or otherwise? What happens when the cost of that fight overwhelms and destroys? Can we forgive? Can we be forgiven? Is there such a thing as hope? While I don't pretend to have simple, conclusive answers to any of these questions, it is for the purpose of posing and wrestling with these thoughts that this story of war, fought both at home and abroad, was written down.

At certain points within this work you will find instances of what could be called “strong language.” Please know that such language is employed in an effort to accurately represent the context and

interactions of real people, particularly within the military environment. The work of the military, specifically the Army Ranger community of which I was once a part, is harsh to say the least, and the language used within that environment is consistent with that reality. Conveying truth is the goal, not the shock value that such language can sometimes create. I hope the commitment to accuracy as it relates to the language used, strong or otherwise, serves as an insight into the story and not a barrier to understanding.

Finally, unless otherwise noted, the material for this book comes from my memories, journal, and personal records. As deemed appropriate, some names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals. I have reconstructed the times, dates, events, and conversations portrayed in this book to the best of my recollection. When possible, I have cross-checked my memories with reliable sources. Any errors that have resulted are mine alone.

Foreword

You hold in your hands an amazing and critically important book that captures a critical time and a critical event in our nation's history. I have read many books to come out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and *War Story* has touched and moved me like no other.

I graduated from Ranger School in 1979, class 8-79. Ranger School was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life, with endless days of food deprivation and sleep deprivation, combined with the constant demand of small-unit combat leadership positions.

We who graduated were a hollow-cheeked, sunken-eyed, emaciated band who could have been mistaken for survivors of some terrible concentration camp. The greater the challenge, the greater the pride in wearing the “tab” on our left shoulder—above our unit patch, above all other identification, one word that said it all: *RANGER*. No matter how bad the situation should ever get in our lives, we could always say, “I’ve had worse. At least I’m not still in Ranger School.”

In 1974, I was just a young private in the 82nd Airborne Division when, for the first time since World War II, the US Army created a Ranger battalion. The major difference from all previous Ranger units was that this battalion would be composed, ideally, entirely of graduates of Ranger School.

And Pat Tillman's response to 9/11 was to give up his football career to serve in this most prestigious and elite unit.

I remember our nation's pride when we heard that Pat Tillman, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, had turned down a multimillion-dollar paycheck in professional football in order to serve our nation as a US Army Ranger. Then came our sadness when we heard that Pat Tillman had died on the field of battle. Next was our horror when we heard that Tillman was killed by a tragic train of misunderstanding, the same kind of mistake that saw Confederate General "Stonewall" Jackson killed by friendly fire in the US Civil War—the kind of tragedy that is an inextricable part of all war.

Then came the shame, the deep and burning shame, when we heard that the leadership of our Army had tried to cover up that Pat Tillman had been killed by his own brother Rangers. As always, the cover-up did far more harm than the actual incident.

Steven Elliott's intensely personal account of his experience as one of the shooters in the friendly fire incident and its aftermath is all too familiar. My professional expertise is in researching the effects of combat on the human mind. I am a former West Point psychology professor, and I have written extensively about my findings in my books *On Killing* and *On Combat*, which are read in colleges, military academies, and police academies around the world. Today I train military and law enforcement organizations about the reality of combat.

Part of that reality is a myriad of unseen wounds that our service members may endure as a result of their wartime service, which includes posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a condition in which, essentially, every time you remember a traumatic event, you relive it. The fear, horror, and shame you experience in an event can come back to haunt you for a lifetime. Each time can be just as traumatic and devastating as the first time. Indeed, it can be even worse than the first time, because now you live in a constant state of fear and dread that can amplify the impact across the years. This disorder can be debilitating and devastating, and Steven Elliott's

War Story is a powerful and accurate depiction of an individual struggling with PTSD. An experience in which a person has killed one of his own beloved comrades is one of the most devastating trials anyone could imagine.

The National Health Study for a New Generation of US Veterans, a systematic scientific study of more than 20,000 veterans, tells us that 15.7 percent of the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan have PTSD, and 10.9 percent of service members who did not deploy have PTSD. There are currently more than three million veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and 15.7 percent of this population is almost half a million people. To me, the key point here is that Steven's experiences, his journey from PTSD to healing, can apply to our veterans and to the many civilians who have experienced traumatic events in our general population. They *all* need this book and the lessons from this *War Story*.

Awareness and understanding of the unseen wounds of war, including PTSD, are critical, but it is likewise absolutely essential to know that we can treat PTSD. In Steven's case we see the value of EMDR and other tools in his path to healing. Medical science moves on, we get better every year, and we have hundreds of thousands of cases where PTSD has been treated and individuals have recovered completely. Indeed, you can be even stronger afterward; this is called posttraumatic growth. The goal, therefore, is not simply PTSD awareness but that those who are suffering the unseen wounds of war find a path to healing and strength.

The war story that Steven Elliott has courageously shared in this book is a tale of shame, of failure, and of one individual caught up in tragic events. But it is also a story of some people who did the right thing and stood behind a young Sergeant Elliott. And most important, this book provides powerful and redeeming evidence of that greatest and most important of truths: God's ability to heal us, his power to take us when we are most broken and to make us stronger in the broken places. From the depths of human despair to the supremacy of God's healing and redemption, this story is

told with such grace and authority that I was personally moved to tears.

In the end, the greatest achievement of this *War Story* is to tell that most ancient, powerful, and vital of all truths: “It is no secret what God can do / What He’s done for others, He’ll do for you.”

Dave Grossman

Lt. Colonel, US Army (Ret.)

Author of *On Killing*, *On Combat*,
and *Assassination Generation*

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Prologue

The shovel scraped the rock of the canyon floor, carving a hole in the Afghan landscape. Dust sprang out like the last dirty breath of a dying man as a small cavern emerged in the soil.

I took a green ammo can, now full of empty brass shells, and laid it to rest in the miniature grave I had just dug. No eulogy was offered as the flat, drab lid sank below the earth's surface. No songs were sung as the final burial approached.

I returned to our vehicle and continued to place spent shell casings from the .50-caliber machine gun mounted in the turret and from my own weapon, the M240B machine gun, into yet another ammo can, laying the hollow brass casualties to rest and finally covering them with dirt. Hundreds of rounds had been fired the previous day by me and my fellow Rangers who called this vehicle "home" while on mounted patrol on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border in the Taliban-ridden Khost Province. If only brass shells were all that needed burying.

"Get her cleaned up, boys. We'll be moving back to the FOB once it's dark." This was the simple order given to us by our squad leader and vehicle commander, Staff Sergeant Greg Baker.

"Roger, Sarn't" was our collective reply as we continued to

remove the metal remnants of yesterday's engagement. Save for removing spent shell casings, there was little else we could do to make the Humvee truly clean. The doorless, roofless machine would always bear some trace of this canyon's dirt, but at least some element of yesterday's memory could be cleansed.

Yesterday. April 22, 2004. Our platoon had been split, one half to clear a village and look for the Taliban, and the other half to escort a broken Humvee back to Forward Operating Base Salerno—a Humvee we would have happily left behind if our commander at the FOB would have allowed it. Our vehicle drove behind the useless Humvee as it was towed by an Afghan local. It was stupid and we all knew it. Splitting the unit and thereby severing communications between the two elements, moving at dusk, following a civilian through a narrow, nearly impassable canyon. Stupid.

We entered the darkening canyon on the evening of April 22, 2004, shadows growing longer by the minute as daylight faded. An explosion erupted from the hillside. We stopped, stuck behind the broken Humvee as the Afghan driver fled. Muzzle flashes sparked to life from the graying cliffs, and we returned fire, confident that we would die and now, the day after, thankful we hadn't. Not everyone in our platoon was as fortunate.

Having survived the kill zone, with darkness upon us, we stopped, checked for casualties, took stock of our ammo, and pulled security.

Two. That was the number of men who had been wounded. Our platoon leader, Lieutenant David Uthlaut, caught shrapnel in his face. Amazingly, he would be okay. Our radio transmission operator, Specialist Jade Lane, was next to him and took rounds to his chest, shoulder, and knee. His body armor saved his life, though his knee was torn to pieces. Both had been part of Serial One, the half of the platoon sent to clear the village.

Two. That was the number of men who had been killed. The first was Sayed Farhad. He was part of the Afghan Military Force, and he and a handful of his comrades had been on patrol with us. He was hit with six rounds in the chest. He wore no body armor and died from his wounds.

The second man to die was an American, a Ranger like us, a member of our platoon. Specialist Pat Tillman. Before joining the army and venturing into the Afghan wilderness, Pat had played football in the NFL. He had turned down a \$3.6 million football contract in favor of military service. Pat was struck in the head with multiple rounds. His body armor did no good.

Now, the day after, the brass had been buried and our weapons cleaned as we waited again for the sun to set and for the order to move out. The air cooled quickly.

I climbed onto the back of the vehicle and sat on ration cases. I opened the feed tray cover of my weapon to ensure it was clean and unobstructed so that more brass rounds—these still filled with lead and powder—could be fired if need be.

I looked up to the turret of the vehicle and saw my immediate superior, Specialist Stephen Ashpole, sitting in the turret where he manned the .50-cal machine gun, the largest and most formidable weapon in our Ranger platoon. As he sat, he seemed to slump, the weight of his head pressing hard into his chest.

“What’s up, Specialist?” I asked.

He lifted his head and turned toward me, his face barely visible in the gray light. “I was talking to Arreola a few minutes ago,” he said. “He was with the first sergeant and some of the other guys over where Pat got hit. He said the first sergeant was pulling .50-cal rounds out of the rock where Pat died.”

The words were as heavy to hear as they must have been to speak. Our enemies didn’t have a .50 cal. The only weapon of that caliber was the one Ashpole was sitting behind. I understood why it was difficult for him to raise his head.

“I’m sure it wasn’t you, Specialist,” I offered. “I’m sure you didn’t hit him.” But how could I be sure?

His head nodded with anxious labor as he sought to receive my words knowing, as I did, that they were based on nothing more than a desire to comfort.

Our vehicle’s engine sprang to life. “Load up, fellas, we’re movin’ out!” was the word from Sergeant Baker.

I turned on my night vision, staring at the now hazy green landscape.

I can't believe it. I wondered, Could Ashpole have hit Pat?

What about me? I fired where he fired last night.

But how could we have hit him?

He couldn't have been there. We were firing at the enemy, weren't we?

The vehicle lurched forward as we began our four-hour ride back to the FOB. I stared intently into the green darkness as the thoughts continued to flow.

What if Ashpole killed him?

What if we killed him?

What if I killed him?

The darkness of the Afghan night offered no reply.

1

LEAVING HOME

Home is the nicest word there is.

LAURA INGALLS WILDER

The day had been full. Relatives descended upon the home place situated on the plains of northwest Kansas, five and a half miles from the nearest town. The home place had been built by my great-grandfather Carl Luhman, and it was where one of his sons, Hugo, now lived in retirement along with my grandma Irene. Every Memorial Day weekend, Grandma and Grandpa hosted a family reunion at the home place. Relatives gathered while the kids eagerly engaged in water-gun fights of epic proportions. Only darkness could halt the activity.

At nine years old, I lay in one of the guest rooms upstairs waiting for sleep to come. I glanced at a portrait of Grandpa on the dresser, which was partially illuminated by a night-light sitting next to the frame. He was a handsome twenty-year-old with wavy black hair. He

offered neither smile nor frown while wearing his army dress uniform, khaki tie neatly tucked into his khaki shirt. The picture itself was printed in a dreamy sepia hue, and it was as if a silver-screen war hero had descended from the altar of victory and become my grandpa. He was once Corporal Luhman, a gunner on a 155 Howitzer cannon, and he served on the Italian front in World War II for a full year and a half. He returned from the war and spent his life as a farmer, raising wheat and cattle. He was now my grandpa, the closest I would come to a father, and a man of endless vibrancy and joy whose wartime service provided no hint of burden that I could see.

I could hear frogs croaking through the open window. It began to rain gently as I fell asleep.

Memorial Day 1990 dawned fair and clear. Grandpa exchanged his farmer's overalls for black slacks, a black tie, a white short-sleeved button-down shirt, and an American Legion cap emblazoned with the organization's gold emblem. His service in World War II was both normal and extraordinary—normal in that he never embellished or avoided conversations about the war, which I as his grandson was endlessly curious about; extraordinary, because he was a living, breathing member of the Greatest Generation that had sailed to Europe and helped defeat the Axis powers. The more humbly he acknowledged his service, the more brightly his heroic halo seemed to shine.

Grandma had dutifully and joyfully fulfilled her role as part of the American Legion Auxiliary, women whose husbands had served and who themselves served the community. Today their service would come in the form of song and food.

The men of the local American Legion, Grandpa included, were part of a color guard that would visit each surrounding cemetery and provide a twenty-one-gun salute, firing blank rounds from bolt-action rifles. The ladies of the Auxiliary would accompany the color guard to these grave sites and sing patriotic hymns a cappella. Then, having sufficiently honored the dead, all would descend on the American Legion building in nearby Natoma for a hearty meal of beef and noodles, graciously and tirelessly served by the ladies.

We made our way to the Immanuel Lutheran Cemetery just a mile away. A steady wind stirred the smattering of weathered cedar trees. I stood quietly among the crowd of nearly fifty, glancing at the graves of my ancestors. Morning dew provided a bluish gray tint to the green carpet upon which we stood. The air was still cool but the sun signaled the heat that was to come as the hours wore on.

As we waited with quiet reverence, one of the Auxiliary women, nearly seventy and wearing blue slacks, a white blouse, and a red, white, and blue vest, spoke into a microphone connected to a portable speaker.

My grandma stood behind her with ten of her compatriots, all similarly adorned in patriotic business casual attire. They looked like a living American flag.

I strained to hear over the wind as the woman in front solemnly read off names from a list of twenty veterans buried at the Immanuel Lutheran Cemetery, veterans of every war our country had fought since the Civil War. After each name, a young girl pulled a red paper poppy out of a basket and dropped it onto the ground. Each time, the persistent Kansas breeze pushed the poppy a few inches off target and ultimately to a stopping place in the thick, damp buffalo grass.

When all the names had been read, the Auxiliary ladies sang two verses of "God Bless America." A two-man color guard presented the American flag. Then seven men, Grandpa Luhman among them, marched into view. They were all dressed as Grandpa was. Each carried a bolt-action rifle. Most were World War II veterans, but one had served in Korea and one in Vietnam. The commander of this detail was dressed the same as the others save for the addition of a holstered .45-caliber pistol. He soon broke the silence.

"Detail, attention! Present arms!"

The rifles were now held forward.

"Ready, aim, fire!"

The seven rifles erupted as I flinched, shocked at how loud even blanks could be. Seven empty brass casings were flung to the ground as the bolts were pulled back and a new round was placed in the chamber of each rifle.

“Ready, aim, fire!”

I covered my ears this time. The report from the rifles was still deafening.

“Ready, aim, fire!”

The final volley echoed and rolled across the plains into ultimate silence.

The silence was broken by a lone trumpeter, standing behind us at the far edge of the cemetery. The somber tones of taps bathed the audience in a wave of emotion.

Once taps had concluded, the color guard marched away, and the kids, myself included, ran to the place they had just stood to gather the spent shell casings from the blank rounds.

I admired the cylinders of brass, proof of Grandpa’s service, symbols of a glorious past and a bright and shining future.

The ceremony was part of a national celebration, but it had personal significance. My great-grandpa Carl Luhman, who had served in World War I, was buried there. His name had just been read, and one of the poppies resting on the grass was dropped in his honor. My great-uncle Vic Luhman, Grandpa’s only brother and a Korean War vet, would be buried here as would Grandpa himself.

That night, as Grandpa unwound from a day of honoring the war dead at the local cemeteries, I peppered him with questions.

“Why did you join, Grandpa?”

He considered the question before responding. “Well, I suppose I would have been drafted, but I just didn’t want to wait for that. I knew that I needed to serve. Hitler was taking over Europe, the Japanese had attacked us, you know? It was just something we had to do, fight them people, so I volunteered. I had flat feet, though, so they put me in the field artillery. Otherwise I probably would have been in the infantry.”

“Did you ever have to shoot anybody?”

“No, we were a long way from the front lines,” he said with almost a sense of boredom. “I only had to fire my carbine a few times. We fired a lot of shells, though. A lot of shells,” he admitted.

“How big were they?”

“Oh, about ninety-five pounds.”

“Wow! And you loaded them all by yourself?”

“Well, when I had to. Sometimes we didn’t have enough men, so I’d have to load the gun and fire it myself. I was one of the bigger guys and was used to the work from being on the farm. Some of the guys got to calling me ‘Horse’ as kind of a nickname.” He said this plainly with no hint of boasting.

“Did you ever get shot at?” I sensed I was getting somewhere.

“Oh, well, you know, not really. I mean, we did get strafed by German aircraft a few times earlier in the war, but they didn’t have much. By the time we got past the Po Valley in the north, we could see all they had were carts to pull their supplies. They didn’t even have trucks or tanks no more. The Italians had surrendered. By that time, the Germans were surrendering more and more, and a lot of them were just kids. There was always a Nazi, you know, one of the SS officers, with a unit, but the rest of ’em were just kids like us and a lot of ’em even younger. I couldn’t believe it. They’s just the people, you know? If I lived over there, I might have been in the German army too. They was just the people. Hard to believe,” he said slowly shaking his head.

I was close to something but would get no closer. He answered my childish questions politely with no desire to offer deception or glorification regarding the act of war in which he’d engaged.



Our family was Christian. All four of my grandparents attended the same small Lutheran church in nearby Natoma, Kansas. I was baptized as an infant in the Lutheran Church, but my mom, Cindy, soon left that denomination in favor of a more open and demonstrative version of her Christian faith. She and my dad, Mark, divorced shortly after I was born, and she would say it was during that time that she found the Lord and became a follower of Jesus. Prior to that, she had a sense of religion but no relationship with God.

At the age of four, while driving in the car with Mom, I made an announcement. “I want to follow Jesus,” I told her, having done so with no pressure or suggestion.

“Well, why don’t you tell him that?” she said simply, staring ahead as she drove, and I did.

Mom never remarried, and I had no other siblings. Grandma and Grandpa Luhman were always close by, offering all manner of support to their daughter, the youngest of three, who would raise me on her own.

Grandpa and I spent a lot of time together. I was his “helper” on projects big and small. I rode in the combine with him as he cut wheat, the smell of diesel and dirt marking the joy of the harvest he so dearly loved. I gardened with him. His favorite pastime was to simply watch things grow. He was a man of the land in the truest sense, but his life as a farmer stood on the youthful pedestal of his military service. Somehow that seemed the starting point, and as a very young child, I thought that’s what I would do: to fight, to serve and be like Grandpa.

As childhood turned into adolescence, I harbored no thought or ambition toward military service. I greatly admired those who had served but couldn’t see myself traveling down that road. My childish rehearsals of combat were nothing but a game that many boys played.

I was a good student, bookish and quiet, and as my high school years progressed, I found myself more interested in a career in law. Perhaps I had read one too many John Grisham novels, but the idea of fighting for those who otherwise couldn’t fight for themselves, to be the good guy helping the underdog, seemed to speak to me. I didn’t know exactly what shape that would take, but I knew that if I continued to be a good student, I could do well for myself and reach a place where I could help others in seeing the truth win out and justice prevail.

When I graduated from high school in 1999, I chose to attend Oral Roberts University (ORU), a small Christian college in Tulsa, Oklahoma. ORU’s mission is to educate the “whole person”—spirit, mind, and body—which resonated with me.

In the fall of 2001 I began my junior year at ORU. I was studying business and working as an intern with a financial planning firm. The

practicality of a business degree and the flexibility that offered was appealing, though I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with it. That fall semester, I didn't have any morning classes on Tuesdays or Thursdays, so on that particular 11th day of September in 2001 I was fast asleep in my dorm well into the late morning.

A friend woke me up.

"Hey Steve," he said, "you might want to get up and see what's going on."

The message couldn't have been delivered with greater understatement.

I stumbled to a television and was horrified to see news footage of people leaping from burning windows to their deaths and two of the tallest buildings in America crumbling to the ground. It was beyond belief. Beyond comprehension. Despite the thirteen hundred miles between New York and Tulsa, the horror unleashed on 9/11 felt personal.

The images were searing. The implications were sobering. Everything changed that morning. Everything.

As the school year progressed, I began to reflect on conversations I'd had with Grandpa in which he suggested that "it wouldn't hurt to talk to a military recruiter" just to see what my options would be. He was never heavy-handed in these suggestions, but I had always dismissed them. Now, in the wake of 9/11, the question of military service persisted.

With the invasion of Afghanistan well underway, it soon became evident that the newly declared "War on Terror" would not be won quickly. We were now a nation at war, not simply a nation conducting a military strike in Afghanistan.

I completed my junior year at ORU and went home to Kansas for a break before heading back to campus for summer school. I had a few courses I wanted to knock out to make my senior year more manageable. I spent some of that time at the home place with Grandma and Grandpa. After an afternoon working in the garden, Grandpa and I sat on the front porch and talked as we often did.

"What made you want to join?" I asked as conversation meandered to the war.

“Well, I just felt like I had to, I guess. I felt like if I didn’t, I’d always be sorry. The Japanese attacked us and Hitler declared war against us. I knew I had to serve.”

“How long were you in?”

“Let’s see, I’s in training for about a year in California and Oregon, and then we shipped out for North Africa at the end of ’43. We landed in Italy right after Anzio and was there until the armistice. I guess about two and a half years.”

“Wow. Were you ever homesick?”

“Oh man, yeah. Gosh, I felt like I was a million miles away, you know? Didn’t really know when we’d come home.”

“What was that like? Coming home, I mean.”

“It was somethin’ else. After taking the ship back to Alabama and the train to Salina just an hour and a half away, the bus dropped me off at Alton about twelve miles north of here in the middle of the night. The folks didn’t have a phone, and I didn’t want to wait ’til morning, so I just walked.”

“You walked the last twelve miles?” I asked, smiling.

“Well, I’d walk a bit and run a bit. I’s wearin’ a suit and had a suitcase. I didn’t mind too much. The folks sure got a shock when I knocked on the door,” he said as he savored the taste of that memory—the memory of his final walk to the porch where we now sat.

I returned to ORU unsettled. I soon knew that between me and whatever else life had in store was military service. I couldn’t shake that sense, that drawing. Part of me was angry. We had been attacked on our soil in a magnitude that had not been seen since Pearl Harbor. This was my generation’s call to arms. I too felt that I would regret looking back and not having served during this time. I didn’t think poorly of anyone else who chose not to serve; I just knew I would regret it myself, as if I had chickened out somehow. I couldn’t shake it. I couldn’t shake this challenge that I knew I couldn’t refuse. But most of all, and this I can only somewhat understand in hindsight, I loved Grandpa. In loving someone, there can be a desire to share a common experience and love them more. He never asked me to serve, never pushed or prodded. But he was a

man, and I wanted to be like him. Part of that, I came to know, would mean choosing to serve.

As summer school started and my decision to join became more and more real, I did what I was good at: I researched and read books. I went to bookstores and pored over every book on the military I could find. I was especially attracted to those works dealing with the world of special operations, particularly the Rangers and Green Berets.

I then contacted my dad's cousin Bob, a retired full-bird colonel who had spent his career as a member of Special Forces (the Green Berets) and was now living in California. He was a Vietnam vet. I was trying to understand the distinctions of the various communities and where I might best find my place. He provided clarity, particularly as it related to distinctions between Rangers and Special Forces, the former being much more of a shock infantry unit and the latter focusing more on training and force multiplication, though also possessing a combat function. One thing was clear to me: I wanted to fight. Like Grandpa, I wanted to serve in combat, seeing what I was made of and fulfilling my own self-imposed rite of passage in the process. A desk job was out of the question. Our country was at war, and I sensed a duty to participate and serve in my generation's fight.

For the next few weeks the wheels were constantly spinning, and I found myself pulling up to the nearest army recruiting station situated in one of Tulsa's many strip malls. There I met Sergeant Jackson.

Sergeant Jackson looked and sounded exactly the part of an army recruiter. Stocky with blond hair cut neatly into a high and tight and with green eyes to match the uniform, he wore his mint green class B dress shirt tucked neatly into his perfectly creased dark green slacks. His voice betrayed the life of a smoker, and it was after a long draw on a Marlboro that he greeted me as he stood outside the door of the office.

"Hello, young man. Can I help you?"

I briefly froze, realizing I was taking a step from the theoretical to the real, and for all my analysis and thought, I found myself slightly embarrassed as I spoke the words: "I want to see about enlisting in the army and joining the Rangers."

I felt stupid as I said it. Sure, join the Rangers. Me and every other guy who had watched *Black Hawk Down* one too many times. *I just want to drop off my application for one of the most elite infantry units the world has ever known. I'm great with spreadsheets and ratio analysis. You'll be lucky to have me.* Who was I kidding? I felt like a fool.

I expected him to immediately berate me, but after taking a final drag on his cigarette, he said, “Well, you’re in the right place. Come on in, and let’s talk it over.”

As I sat across the desk from Sergeant Jackson, it quickly became apparent that this was not a normal conversation for him.

“So let me get this straight. You’re a year out from graduating near the top of your class with a business degree, and you want to go in enlisted, not as an officer, and try to join the Rangers.”

It still sounded like a dumb idea when he said it but slightly less dumb than when I had uttered that thought a few minutes before. Perhaps if I heard it spoken out loud often enough, I’d begin to embrace the reality that I was pursuing a dangerous profession and one that would require more of me than I could ever imagine.

“Yes. I want to be at the tip of the spear”—I had just learned that phrase and used it whenever I could—“and I don’t want to spend a bunch of time becoming an officer.”

He pondered this and then explained the steps: basic training, infantry school, airborne, and then finally RIP, the Ranger Indoctrination Program that served as the selection phase for entry into the Ranger regiment.

I soon took my Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test (ASVAB), which the military uses to determine what jobs you’re qualified for. I scored in the 99th percentile on the ASVAB as a whole and got a 134 on the GT score, an additional measure of aptitude, which meant I could basically do anything I wanted. The military especially needed intelligence analysts and linguists, both requiring high aptitude scores and both desk jobs.

Again, Sergeant Jackson challenged me. “You know, a lot of folks would kill to get a linguist job. You’ll spend a couple years at the

Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, and you can pretty much write your own ticket from there.”

“No thanks,” I said. “I don’t want to be stuck in a schoolhouse no matter where it is.”

“Well, you’re in luck, I suppose, because the required ASVAB score to be an infantryman is 50 and the minimum GT is 108. That makes you overqualified.”

“Great. Where do I sign?” I said dryly and directly. The question I kept pondering was, *Am I overthinking or underthinking this?* I tried not to think about it.

By August I had completed all the paperwork to go to the final stage of my enlistment, MEPS, the Military Entrance Processing Station in Oklahoma City, where I was poked and prodded by all manner of doctors to ensure I was fit for service. Sergeant Jackson drove me from Tulsa and waited for me all day as I jumped through one bureaucratic hoop after another.

At the end of it all, I and the other recruits who had passed muster stood in an elegant room with royal blue carpeting from wall to wall and the American flag hanging gracefully in the front. We were called to attention and instructed to raise our right hands, and then we took the oath of enlistment.

This final step was real but not real because I was enlisting as part of the Delayed Entry Program, which basically meant I was enlisted but my start date was delayed so I could finish school. I was eager to join, but it never occurred to me to not graduate. That was a commitment I had to complete before moving on to whatever was next.

I climbed in the back of Sergeant Jackson’s Dodge Stratus and promptly fell asleep as the afternoon sun beat down through the window.

That night I hung out with Evan Essenburg, a guy who was quickly becoming my best friend. Evan was a year older than I was and had finished his undergrad in psychology the year before. He was now in his first year as a master of divinity student at ORU’s School of Theology.

Evan and I met through ORU missions training and discovered we

had mutual friends and a common background. He too was the only son of a single mom, his dad having died unexpectedly when he was very young. He too was from the Midwest, hailing from Fort Wayne, Indiana. And he too was unsure what his future would hold and was seeking his own path beyond his schooling. We both loved the outdoors and had climbed Pike's Peak together with another friend, Dan Russell. The three of us were always plotting our next adventure.

After a quick shower at the dorm, I hopped in my car and drove over to Evan's apartment, and we grabbed a bite at Taco Cabana next door to ORU. Besides my summer school roommate, Evan was the only other person at ORU I'd told about my decision, which was now a reality.

Evan was and is one of the best listeners on the planet, so his attention to my words was not unusual, but I could tell he was strangely focused as I recounted my deliberations, conversations, and ultimate action to enlist.

"So, I'm officially enlisted as an 11X, which is basically an infantryman with a Ranger option. It means that if I can complete basic, airborne school, and RIP, then I can go to one of the three Ranger battalions. I'm hoping for Second Batt up in Washington. I can't imagine I'd want to live in Georgia, where First and Third Batt are."

"What did your mom say?" Evan asked with no small measure of curiosity and concern.

"She told me what she's always told me, that if that's what I feel God has for me, then I should do it. I can tell she doesn't like it, though. My grandpa was shocked and proud. He didn't think I'd ever join the military."

He took a deep breath and looked out the window into the parking lot, staring at nothing in particular but seeming to be thinking a great deal.

"I'm proud of you, man," he finally said. I knew he meant it.

A couple of weeks later I dropped by Evan's apartment, knocked briefly, and let myself in to his one-room flat befitting a first-year theology student.

"Come in!" he hollered from the bathroom.

“I already did!” I hollered back.

Upon stepping into his living room, I was immediately struck by a two-foot pile of books stacked next to his recliner. It appeared that Evan went to the nearest public library and checked out every book he could find in the “military” section. There seemed to be a particular emphasis on special operations in general and Rangers in particular. I was beyond curious and couldn’t help myself.

“Whatcha’ readin’?” I asked.

As he entered the room, he looked at me sheepishly, and immediately I knew that he wasn’t just thinking about enlisting but that his heart was already there while his brain was playing catch-up. Evan was nothing if not methodical in his decision making, and this level of research clearly indicated that his wheels were spinning big time.

Before he could say a word, I said, “You’re going to enlist, aren’t you?”

“Well, I don’t know. I just—well, I’m sort of just thinking about it, you know?”

“Really?” I said skeptically. “Seems like you’re immersing yourself pretty deep in the literature to just be thinking about it.”

“Yeah, I went and talked to Sergeant Jackson too. I’ll be taking my ASVAB soon and, well, we’ll see. I dunno.”

“What, you think you’ll fail the ASVAB?” I chided him. “That sort of sounds like you’ve already moved beyond the ‘just thinking about it’ stage. When were you going to tell me, when we bumped into each other in Afghanistan?” I was shocked and overjoyed at the same time. From that moment forward, we were no longer just good friends; we were brothers. I had someone with the same heart and same vision to walk alongside me as I prepared for what was to come.

Before long, Evan had completed MEPS, and he, too, had a Ranger contract with the goal of serving at Second Batt. Evan had an uncle who lived in Seattle whom he had visited as a kid, and he had always loved the Pacific Northwest. Serving there as opposed to Georgia was a no-brainer for him, as it was for me. His enlistment would begin a few months after mine as he wanted one final summer as a civilian before starting basic.

For the remainder of my senior year until I graduated on May 3, 2003, Evan and I became virtually inseparable, training together six days a week. I was built for the soccer pitch and Evan for the football field. He was a solid six feet tall and was a standout lineman on his high school football team and one of the more athletic guys around campus. He pushed me in the weight room, and I pushed him as we ran the hills of South Tulsa, five and six miles at a time. Never knowing if we'd measure up. Never knowing if it would be enough. Never knowing if we could do it but taking comfort in the fact that we could share these hopes of success and fears of failure with each other.

Writing school papers on contemporary English literature seemed abstract. Completing projects for strategic management class seemed pointless. Studying US foreign policy seemed purely academic as I was preparing to be a tool of that very policy. As I completed my classes that year, it was all I could do not to focus only on what lay ahead. The prospect of combat, of war, made my studies feel so much less consequential.

The war I joined for in the fall of 2002, to destroy those who had brought the terror of 9/11, would evolve before I would begin my enlistment and include not just the Taliban in Afghanistan but Saddam Hussein in Iraq. As 2003 began and it was evident that the United States would invade Iraq with or without the support of the international community, I became somewhat confused.

I understood Saddam was anything but a benevolent dictator, but I didn't understand his tie to the terror attacks of 9/11. Why would we go to Iraq? Ultimately, it was the testimony of Colin Powell before the United Nations that put my mind at ease.

I had read his biography and greatly admired Secretary of State Powell's military service and leadership. As an infantry platoon leader wounded in Vietnam, he more than anyone understood the dangers and devastation of engaging in ill-conceived and unnecessary wars. He wouldn't be making the case for an Iraq invasion on the world's stage if he felt there were any other options.

I acquiesced both to the judgment of a leader who had fought in Vietnam and to my own eventual place in the Department of Defense,

which would be far from the level of policy makers. To even consider or debate such things began to feel odd and unnecessary. I could only hope and pray that those in authority knew what they were doing.

After graduation, I returned to Kansas, to the home place, to await the beginning of my enlistment just eighteen days later on May 21. It was a long three weeks as I attempted to quell my ever-present anxiety regarding what was to come. I just wanted to get the training over with, but the prospect and pain of leaving home was setting in.

I wasn't much of a morning person at the time, and the days were hot, so I reserved the later afternoon/early evening for my workout routines. I'd jog down the driveway, through the white, metal arch that simply said "Luhman," and turn right along the white rock road toward the cemetery. Each intersection was exactly a mile apart. The land within that square mile constituted a "section" in farm speak, or six hundred and forty acres.

Halfway through one of my four-mile section runs, I passed the black archway of the cemetery, glancing briefly at the old church bell as I wiped sweat from my brow. In the state of meditation that came during a long, steady run, I considered the land around me, the openness and light in which I was enveloped. I considered the stories of war I had heard Grandpa tell whenever I had pressed him for details as a young boy.

After sprinting back, I stretched and sat on the porch to watch the sunset, the light softening as the shadows lengthened.

As I lay in bed that night, I stared at Grandpa's picture on the dresser. The night-light was off, and his face was invisible in the darkness. All I could see was the rectangular silhouette of the frame. There I lay, between waking and sleeping, a shadow lingering. A sadness growing.

What will it be like to be a Ranger? Can I do it? Am I good enough? What will it mean to kill? Will I have to? If I go to war and come home, what stories will I have to tell?

