

# PALADIN'S ODYSSEY

BY BRUCE FOTTLER

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# CHAPTER 1

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Winston Churchill once said: *“In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.”* I've always believed this to be so, but I've also struggled to determine when the bodyguards should be retired.

My name is Joseph E. Paladin, former major in the United States Army, retired colonel in the Maine Republic Militia, and one of the founders of the NAC (New American Confederation). As I write this memoir, thousands are gathering in Bangor, Maine for the unveiling of a statue to commemorate my life and achievements. I haven't seen it yet, but I'm told it's over five meters tall and will reside as the centerpiece in the lobby of the new capitol building.

The historic commission approached me over a year ago seeking pictures, particularly those I had from the early days. They took a special interest in a photo that showed me riding at the front of an old diesel locomotive as it slowly pulled the first supply train into the Auburn freight yard. It was early morning back in 2019, and we had returned from our first trip to the Loring vault. To my recollection, not many people were there to greet us, as the mission was supposed to be kept secret. I've never shown this picture to anyone before and I don't remember any being taken. Someone I've never met before sent it to me about twenty-five years ago. If the commission decided to use that image, I'm curious to see how it could translate into a statue.

I should be feeling a tremendous sense of gratitude over the recognition, but I'm honestly unnerved over all the fuss. I've never been comfortable with all the attention that my past exploits seem to draw. I've been told on countless occasions that the people of this great new nation hold me in the same esteem as the old country held Thomas Jefferson or George Washington. This has always been difficult for me to fathom and it's taken me many years to come to a reluctant acceptance of how I'm perceived. It's not that I think people are praising me for things that didn't happen. Despite some exaggerations that have blended into the truth over the years, most reports of my known accomplishments are accurate.

In all honesty, I'm feeling an overriding sense of shame over it all. Every time I labor

over my Bangor speech, I can't help obsessing over a secret that I've kept hidden away for decades. I was once told by the person who directed me to keep this secret that there are times when truth needs to be protected by a falsehood. There was little question that protection was germane at the time, but I feel too many years have passed since it's been relevant. Now that history is congealing, I feel the truth needs to come out before legend overshadows fact.

I've sustained a false identity for decades. I'm not really Joseph Paladin.

My actual name is Walter Johnson, but no one has called me that in over forty years. It's a name that died when I assumed the identity of Major Joseph Paladin, United States Army, during the turbulent aftermath of the great flu pandemic. The real story is complicated, and I'll attempt to recount it with as much brutal honesty as my aging mind can recall.

\* \* \*

My strange odyssey began back in 2015. Ironically, apocalyptic tales were popular at the time. I often scoffed over the absurdity of these tired doomsday cliches which played out in books, movies, and television shows that many of us eagerly consumed. The end of the world made for an entertaining distraction, and maybe a frightening nightmare or two. However, once we put down the book, walked out of the theater, or shut off the television, fantasy would relinquish its toehold. But there was always the lingering thought in the back of our minds that wondered: Are these doomsday scenarios plausible? Could something as infinitesimal as a virus bring a powerful civilization to ruin? How could our vast knowledge and wondrous technologies completely fail to stop something so miniscule?

After all, terrorism was our primary concern back then. After airliners flew into skyscrapers, our daily lives were never the same. From that point forward, we fretted over numerous dire scenarios including chemical, radiological, and cyber attacks. Our attention was fixed on human threats, and wars flared as a result.

Then came the great flu pandemic in the winter of 2015, eclipsing all other cataclysms in human history.

I lived in a large suburb of Boston called Waltham and worked as a purchasing agent at a bio-tech company. It wasn't a challenging or terribly exciting job, but it paid the bills. I had recently moved into my own apartment after sharing a place for five years with my old girlfriend, Veronica. She was an out-of-my-league-goddess who left my buddies wondering how an average-looking guy like me scored someone like her. When we first

met, she was pleasant and irresistibly attractive. I enjoyed showing her off and she drank in every ounce of attention. Our shallow relationship began to sour after the first year, and died a slow, agonizing death during the years that followed. In fact, I'm pretty sure she cheated on me a couple of times. The plug needed to be pulled on our high-maintenance sham, and it took me far too long to do anything about it. It was always difficult for me to break from the familiar. That's probably why I slaved away at the same tedious job for nearly as long. I clung to consistency as though it was a security blanket, no matter how miserable the situation became.

After five years, what little remained of our relationship was nothing more than a cheap accessory to Veronica and a bothersome burden to me and my bank account. I finally broke it off with her in late fall of 2014. She was shocked and livid. My friends were mystified that I had pushed a smoking-hot girlfriend away from me. I didn't care. I was relieved that Veronica had finally been excised from my life.

The new year of 2015 started with great hope and promise. At the age of thirty-two, I felt I was still young enough to get back into the singles market. I wanted to explore all the possibilities I had missed while wasting my time with Veronica. However, five years of complacency had taken a toll on me. I was five-ten and a pudgy two-hundred pounds. My once full head of light blonde hair had darkened and begun to recede. Of course, I figured it was nothing a gym membership and a good hair stylist couldn't fix. It wouldn't be long before I sculpted myself into something that camouflaged the monotonously average person I actually was.

At the end of January, hospitals were reporting a tougher than normal flu season. Too many people had taken a pass on the annual flu vaccination and had paid a harsh price. This caused a run on the small vaccine supply that remained, so new batches were rushed into production. A tough flu season wasn't uncommon, so most people took the news in stride and continued with their routines. I remember being satisfied that I had been vaccinated at my company flu-shot clinic back in November. Working at a bio-tech company that helped develop the vaccine had advantages. Problem solved, at least for me.

At the end of February, things changed. The media networks ran alarmist reports of a new mutation of the H1N1 flu strain. I remember jogging on a treadmill at the gym while watching the news-crawl use terms like *Super-Flu Pandemic*, and *Spanish Flu Redux*. Everyone watching shared a chuckle while someone requested the channel to be changed. The news media's quest for ratings through brazen fear mongering had already strained their credibility. Because of this, too few took the current reports seriously when they first broke, causing a tragic delay. The new and lethal flu strain had a few extra days to spread

through an apathetic population. After all, we were being vigilant against terrorism, not a flu epidemic. The Boston Marathon was coming up and it was the second year after the bombings. We were all still *Boston Strong*.

By the time we all woke up and paid attention, it was the beginning of March. The death toll rapidly rose. Worldwide estimates at the time were over 100,000 dead. Hospitals were quickly filling, followed by the morgues. Terms like *cytokine storm* and *morbidity* became commonly used. This terrible new flu strain mimicked the Spanish Flu of 1918 with a frightening fidelity. Once infected, the sick would be dead within a couple of days; sometimes sooner. The young and healthy seemed especially susceptible because the flu caused immune systems to overreact, which became deadlier to those with stronger immune systems.

Adding to the woes was a discovery that the newest batches of flu vaccines were ineffective against the new strain. They were different from those dispensed back in the fall of 2014. The fall vaccinations actually contained effective antigens, which was due to a bizarre production mistake by the company I worked for. It would take several more weeks to produce new batches of effective vaccines.

These new vaccines would never see the outside of their factories.

FEMA mobilized with the National Guard and state health crisis units. Breathing masks of any sort became an instant must-have item. Grocery stores and gas stations were overwhelmed, despite a warning from government officials to stay isolated and not to hoard. The entire world slowly lost its sanity as panic overtook social order.

By mid-March, martial law was declared. The estimated worldwide death toll soared to over one million. One press report was bold enough to disclose that for every one flu death, another died because of civil unrest. I suspect the death toll due to violence must have been much higher than that. Our President tried to calm us, but too many news pundits were eager to call him out on the dire realities. It was too obvious that our government was in full spin control; trying to project a confidence that they were on top of the situation. Nothing was further from the truth, and no matter how many helicopters and drones they put in the air, we all sensed that the situation was actually spinning out of control. It was too easy to mistrust our government in the aftermath of so many political scandals and appalling approval ratings.

I was hunkered down in my small Waltham apartment. It was located in a complex of aging, brick-faced, three-story buildings tucked away in a tightly packed neighborhood. We were surrounded by older, modest ranch-style houses with as many telephone poles as old oak trees in their front yards. I liked it because it was located close to the main roads,

which offered me several alternative routes to work. My building was quiet and my neighbors generally kept to themselves. Despite the rising chaos in the world around us, a sliver of calm managed to prevail on our small street.

It didn't bother me to occasionally venture out for supplies because I was one of the lucky few who had received the right vaccination. However, reports of escalating violence started to worry me. The predominantly empty grocery shelves also gave me an ominous feeling that our normal way of life would never return. As I watched the endless media coverage, a depression started to envelop me. Their brigades of medical experts weren't shy in sharing all the grisly details about how the flu performed its deadly rendition. It seemed absurd that these reports were typically accompanied by sanitized illustrations because using actual pictures was deemed too graphic. I once saw someone being wheeled out of our apartment complex, suffering from advanced flu symptoms. The EMT's tried to hold a once-white towel over a nose that bled profusely. There was even a small trickle of blood coming from his ear. Uncontrolled hemorrhaging was a typical symptom associated with this new and terrifying killing machine.

The EMT's stopped responding to emergency calls a short time later. A shelter-in-place order was issued for those who were infected, people were urged to stay away from hospitals, and medical practices closed their doors. From that point on, once you contracted the flu, you were on your own. Many died gruesome deaths in their own beds. Too many children watched their parents shut themselves away and then listened to their ghastly moans, sputtering coughing fits, and heaving, eventually followed by a terrible silence.

I was consumed by the thought that I couldn't survive in a world without convenience. I knew nothing of being a survivalist and never watched those outdoor reality shows on television. The closest relevant experience I had was a couple of years I spent as a Cub Scout. I was nothing more than a spoiled, middle-class kid raised in the suburbs. I needed my car, my electricity, well stocked grocery stores, drive through service, and my data-phone. There was little doubt it was all slipping away. I sat and wondered when the electricity would finally go out.

I worried what would become of my parents who resided in a Florida retirement community. I last talked to them at the end of February and they were healthy. They too had received the right vaccine, even though they were part of an age group that had a better survivability rate. I also had a younger sister in Texas but was never able to contact her. Long-distance calls became nearly impossible. Soon, all phone service was restricted to emergency use only. I lost contact with all of my friends, many of whom lived only a town or two away. Internet services were intermittent and most websites fell offline due to

lack of administration.

I remember a silly but vivid nightmare of being stalked by zombies, which probably came from a popular television show I used to watch. After waking up, I knew that my reality had become worse than my nightmares. I actually yearned to deal with slow-shuffling zombies rather than a world full of people acquiescing to panic. My sobering reality was that I was holed up and unarmed. Anyone could have broken through my flimsy door and taken anything they wanted. Funny, I had always been a proponent of gun control until that point.

By April, the National Guard formed numerous disposal teams. They came around in trucks marked with large, red bio-hazard insignias. Some were military vehicles, but most were commandeered commercial trucks. I suppose the military were reluctant to use their own vehicles; whatever they used had to be disposable. The teams would sweep through a neighborhood knocking at all the doors to check for bodies. I even heard stories about mercy executions. Several people claimed to have seen soldiers ending the lives of anyone they found close to death. Some thought it was out of compassion, while others were convinced that the soldiers just didn't want to make another trip back to pick up the bodies.

The disposal teams left large spray-painted markings on all the exterior doors after checking. I noticed the color of the markings varied, so I asked one of the soldiers what they meant. He warned me through his mask to stay away from anything in neon orange. It indicated infected people in the residence. A team would return later to recover the bodies.

One time, I stood in the parking lot and watched five bodies being removed from the apartment building next to mine, all wrapped in heavy black plastic. A chill shot through me after looking into the back of one of the trucks, those black bags were stacked to the ceiling. The horrible smell of death couldn't be sealed in with them. I ran back to my apartment and spent the next half-hour puking into the toilet while hoping my next door neighbor didn't think I contracted the flu.

I was soon on a first-name basis with neighbors I had hardly acknowledged a few weeks before. We banded together to keep watch while maintaining a polite distance from each other. It was clear the police presence was becoming ever more sparse. One resident owned a handgun and it gave us a feeling of safety. His name was Bill, and we kept a very close eye on him to make sure he stayed healthy. He was six-two, musclebound, and not socially graceful. He was often gruff, but we happily endured his social shortcomings. Bill and his gun needed to stick around.

At the end of April, the disposal teams stopped coming around. Most cell phone service was gone and the few remaining television stations were tuned to the emergency broadcast system. They didn't say much about what was really going on; no surprise there. Fewer helicopters were in the air, but Air Force jets occasionally roared overhead to let us know that our government was still alive and kicking. The National Guard set up food distribution centers because the grocery stores had shut down. We walked or rode bikes in order to get to these places, weaving in and out of the piles of garbage that hadn't been collected in weeks. Gasoline was scarce and no one was allowed to travel out of town. A water-boil order was soon issued, but the water service failed entirely a week later.

Unknown to us, the worldwide pandemic death toll had jumped from the last reported one million to a staggering one hundred million. Social order in most countries was quickly breaking down. In the United States, law enforcement and National Guard ranks were being depleted. The flu was no longer the primary culprit. Desertion was rampant. Self-preservation was fast becoming the order of the day.

Meanwhile, in many underdeveloped countries, far more people were being killed by war, hunger, and unsanitary living conditions than by the flu. The United States would soon be ravaged in the same ways.

The world as we knew it was passing away.