

CHAPTER 2

BAPTISM BY FIRE

Khost Province, Afghanistan

1100 HOURS, FORWARD OPERATING BASE SALERNO, close to the border of Pakistan. Elements of the Second Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, were awaiting transport on UH-60 Blackhawk Helicopters for insertion into the outskirts of a Taliban stronghold near the mountains of Tora Bora.

Their mission—to assault and rid any remnants of Taliban fighters who were still left over after the last engagement in that area. Command had gotten word from local sources that they were attempting to reinforce and reestablish their presence in the region—something that they could not allow to happen after all of the blood and sweat the Rangers had put into clearing them out.

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Waiting for his unit to move, Roger had found himself leaning against his rucksack and daydreaming about his late grandfather. Proud of the fact that he was only the second in his family to ever enlist, Roger wanted to live up to Buck's remarkable legacy. The young man joined the Army a year earlier as an infantry grunt. However, he had become a stellar athlete and dedicated Soldier, and wanted more of a test than merely being a ground pounder.

At the recommendation of his company commander, Roger went to Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia, and, was subsequently assigned to the second battalion at Fort Lewis, Washington. Now, here he was about to step into battle for the first time, hoping that his grandad was now watching over him.

As the whirling wind from the chopping rotors began to kick up dust surrounding the helipads, Roger positioned his NVG's (Night Vision Goggles) onto his kevlar helmet.

"Hey, O'Neil!" His buddy, Frank, yelled over the noise. "You ready for this?"

"As I'll ever be!" Replied Roger, sliding his tactical goggles onto his face.

"Hooaah!" Continued Frank.

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It was Roger's very first mission as a Ranger. Although nervous, he wasn't about to show it in front of such a group of alpha men. As the platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Joe McGowan gave the order to proceed, and his platoon began filing one by one into the waiting choppers.

For the bulk of the roughly thirty-minute helicopter ride, Roger sat silently in his seat. His M-4, barrel down, held firmly between his thighs. He had trained hard and prepared both physically and mentally for that day. On the surface, he looked ready. Still, having yet to fire his weapon in combat, in the back of his mind, he questioned how he would react once the bullets started flying.

They say that all of the training in the world cannot predict how one will respond when that moment of truth finally arrives. Ninety percent of Roger's Ranger unit consisted of combat Veterans, those who deployed months after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. And, as battle-hardened Veterans do, they were keeping a keen eye over all of the newbies, including Roger.

As the pair of Blackhawk's approached and hovered over the LZ, (landing zone) the black, metal doors were thrust open, and squad leaders flung the heavy ropes to the earth.

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“Go, go, go!” McGowan shouted over the racket of rotating blades.

As the Rangers began fast-roping to the dirt, Roger was behind, biting his nails anxiously. Awaiting his turn to go, Frank patted him on the back from behind.

“After you!” he yelled.

M-4 strapped to his back, Roger clutched the rope tightly with his gloved hands, sliding to the ground and following the rest of the men to cover behind a nearby wall.

“Alright, men. Listen up, ” said McGowan. “We have a little hike ahead. We’ll make our way down this path in a staggered formation. Watch for IED’S (improvised explosive devices) and keep your head on a swivel. We don’t know what we’re walking into.”

“Once there,” he continued. “We split into teams and clear each house.”

Roger took a sip from his canteen and clipped his rifle to the D-ring on his vest.

McGowan gave the order to continue, and the Rangers began pushing cautiously down the mountainside pathway. The entire area was rugged and steep, perfect for anyone who wanted to set up an ambush. All seemed quiet, so far. As Roger glanced at the hillside in front of

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them, he got a bad feeling in his gut.

“Do you see this?” he asked Frank, noticing men observing them from overhead.

“Yeah, I see them,” he replied.

As they stretched along the path, Roger’s friend, Shane, noticed one of the men holding a cell phone.

“He’s got a phone!” Shane yelled out to Sergeant McGowan.

The men above had the perfect vantage to watch over the entire valley. McGowan held a fist up, and the platoon came to a halt, taking up positions along the side of the road and watching for anything that could contain an IED.

“I don’t see a damn thing,” Roger said to Frank.

“Me either,” Frank replied. “Let’s keep an eye on those guys, though. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Sergeant McGowan was in the front of the formation, and he had the best view of the hillside from his position. He pointed to the Afghan villager who was standing above, cell phone in hand.

“Put the phone away, sir,” he told the man. “Sir, please put your phone away.”

But, he just nodded.

“I don’t think he speaks English,” Lieutenant Powers

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said to McGowan. "Let's get the interpreter over here!"

Powers was the platoon leader. He'd only recently graduated from West Point and Ranger School. By all accounts, he was a greenhorn. McGowan, on the other hand, was an experienced combat Veteran. Powers stuck to him like white on rice.

As they remained, eyeing the gaggle of men watching over them, the interpreter, whom they called Mel, sped up from the middle of the formation. Mel was born in Islamabad, Pakistan and spoke English as well as any American. An out of work police officer, he jumped at the opportunity to become an interpreter for American forces.

"Yes, sergeant?" He said.

"Tell him to put his phone away," McGowan told him.

"Sir, he's asking you to put your phone away," the interpreter said in Pashto.

The man began motioning his arms erratically.

"I will not!" the villager shouted in Pashto. "I have done nothing wrong!"

"I don't like this, sergeant," Lieutenant Powers retorted. "Something's not right."

"You're telling me," answered McGowan. "Let's get out of here. I don't like having eyes on us."

As the Rangers hunched in the dirt, facing weapons

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downward, Sergeant McGowan backed up and instructed his men to prepare to pass. They were going to leave the area and continue their patrol into the center of the village, ahead. But, before they could make it to the other side of the trail, Roger spotted a man flying to them in a sprint.

“Look out!” He shouted over the heavy wind.

Before the man could get twenty-meters from the Rangers, Frank raised his M-4 and sent a single bullet flying straight through the man’s neck. As he fell to the sand, convulsing, they paused, waiting.

“Damn,” he said. “That was a little too close.”

Abruptly, there was a massive explosion that rocked the hillside and sent Sergeant McGowan flying off of his feet and landing flat on his back as the rest of the platoon hit the dirt.

“Holy shit!” Roger screamed as his ears began ringing. “That was fucking loud!”

“Shit. You ok?” Powers asked, clasping the McGowan’s hands and pulling him to his feet.

“Yeah. I think so,” McGowan replied, brushing the dust from his uniform. “Just busted my damn ass.”

“Right call, guys,” he said to Roger and Frank, as he straightened his tactical vest. “Damn, that rattled my

eardrums!”

“You’re telling me!” Answered Powers. “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

They continued down the long, jagged, unstable pathway that led to the village half a click (kilometer) away. As the men rounded the corner, they could make out the remains of bombed-out earth-colored homes that seemed unlivable, even by Afghan standards.

“Damn. This place has seen better days,” Roger said.

As he glimpsed around the area surrounding the village, though, there was nobody in sight. The place seemed almost eerily quiet. McGowan gave the order to halt and pulled his binoculars from his vest.

“You see anyone?” Powers asked him.

“Nope. The place looks like a ghost town,” he answered, scanning the surrounding homes.

But, before Sergeant McGowan could put his binoculars away, he overheard a blast echo against the steep slope and a long streak of smoke coming from the top of a crumbled structure a few hundred meters away.

“RPG!” He yelled.

The platoon of Rangers hit the dirt hard. As it sailed over their heads and exploded against a nearby boulder, Taliban members appeared from behind the village, and

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AK-47 fire opened up from the outer perimeter.

“I knew that mother fucker with the phone was up to something!” McGowan said. “He was a freaking spotter!”

Crawling across the ground with bullets tearing over them, the group of men took cover behind nearby rocks. Roger understood the moment of truth had finally arrived. The ultimate test to determine if he deserved to be called a United States Army Ranger. With no more time to reflect, Roger pulled the charging handle and flicked the safety off of his weapon. After a second of delay, he looked out toward the buildings and began returning fire on the insurgents that were fast surrounding them.

“Shit!” Shane shouted over the loud sounds of combat. “There must be fifty of them!”

Roger, his ACOG (Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight) resting tight against his face, picked off three fighters who were speeding toward them, watching them slide across the dusty ground as they fell.

“Looks like O’Neil just popped his cherry!” Yelled Frank, firing through a haze of dust.

Sergeant McGowan, squatted, made his way to the center of the platoon.

“Keep pounding those bastards!” He told them. “I’m calling in air support!”

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Shane, with his M-249, SAW, (squad automatic weapon) kept suppressing the enemy with a constant three-round burst of 5.56.

“It’s the old west, boys!” Frank yelled. “They don’t want this!”

As the scent of gun smoke filled the air surrounding the Rangers position, Roger continued to return fire with his M-4.

“They’re still coming!” He said to his buds.

As Roger looked through his ACOG once more, he caught a flash of a group of men setting up a mortar tube on the horizon.

“Sergeant!” He screamed, running toward McGowan. “We need to reposition, sergeant! They’re setting up mortars!”

Next, a hissing sound reverberated out over their heads. The shockwave from the massive blast rattled the men as they leaped for cover. Ears ringing, Roger was lying on his belly with his face in the dirt.

“Shit!” He said to himself, spitting sand from his mouth.

Raising his head and repositioning his helmet, he peered behind and spotted the silhouette of Sergeant McGowan through the smoke. Something wasn’t right.

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“Sergeant!” Roger yelled.

Dizzy and bewildered, he made his way toward McGowan, who was lying motionless in a pool of blood with a piece of shrapnel protruding from his body. As the thirty-strong Ranger platoon resumed holding back the Taliban with everything they had, Roger knelt beside his platoon sergeant, the man who taught him what it meant to be a Ranger. Grabbing him by his gloved hand, he said a silent prayer.

Lieutenant Powers, who was meters away when the mortar fell, stooped beside Roger.

“I’ll call for evac,” he said, pulling out his radio and taking cover behind the large rock formation. “Hang in there!”

But it was too late. Sergeant First Class Trevor McGowan took his final breath with Roger leaning carefully over him.

“No!” Roger screamed, shooting his rifle in the direction of the insurgents.

“Come on, man.” Frank said, pulling him by his vest. “We have to get out of here!”

“We can’t leave him here!” Roger maintained. “Give me a hand!”

Frank moved up from behind him, grabbing Mc-

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Gowan by the limbs as he and Roger carried him down the rocky hill. No sooner than the Rangers made it to the bottom of the mountain, they could hear the roar of the Night Stalkers incoming MH-60L DAP (Direct Action Penetrator) helicopters hurling rockets and firing .50 caliber Gatling guns into the Taliban position.

With destructive force, the whole village went up in an incredible ball of flames. Next, the entire area fell silent. The attack choppers had decimated the enemy until there were none left to fight.

As they loaded Sergeant First Class McGowan's body onto the waiting BlackHawk Helicopter, a sense of darkness fell upon them. They had just lost their beloved leader. Roger stared through the window at the burning village as they rose into the air, bodies littering the ground below. He felt a sickness burning deep inside his stomach. If only air support had arrived ten minutes earlier.

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