

Chapter One

You Are Here

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut up your remains,
Just roll on your rifle and blow out your brains,
And go to your Gawd like a soldier...*

RUDYARD KIPLING

It was October of 2002. We were in a vehicle in the middle of Afghanistan surrounded by hundreds of screaming and jumping Afghanistan boys; like ants that pour out of their ant mound to discover a tasty morsel, the boys had quickly swarmed out of their large mud-brick school compound to surround our SUV. The Afghanistan boys were dressed in dirty, battered clothes and ranged in age from twelve to twenty.

I was driving the Land Cruiser and my Green Beret friend, Master Sergeant Robb, was in the passenger seat. The large

school courtyard, that had been an empty dustbowl prior to our arrival, was now packed with over three hundred dirty-faced boys and young men pressed up against our vehicle. They were hoping to get a touch, look, or souvenir from the Americans. We were unfortunately stuck in the middle of the swarm of young men in the courtyard, unable to move forwards or backwards.

The Afghanistan schoolboys were celebrating our arrival, but were becoming unintentionally violent in their happiness and desire to see and touch real Americans. It was kind of like an out-of-control nightmare surprise party thrown in our honor. Our Toyota Land Cruiser was violently rocked from side to side by the frenzied boys wanting to see us, each side of our SUV lifting off the ground as we rocked. I was completely surprised by our situation, and Robb was getting noticeably disturbed. In my previous specialty as a combat support Military Policeman, I had never been this close to a mob, but now I was smack dab in the middle of one as a pencil-pushing comptroller. I felt like I was suddenly climbing the steep hill of a scary roller coaster ride about to go from two miles an hour to a hundred in a matter of seconds...and there was no way to stop the ride. I was strapped in for the duration and there was not much I was going to be able to do about it. Even though they were initially happy to see

us, the mob mentality was quickly kicking in as they clamored for our attention.

As the Embassy comptroller responsible for financing the Afghanistan Army, I really had no business in the school-yard. My friend, Master Sergeant Robb, had asked me if I wanted to go on a money delivery. I felt like getting out of the Embassy for a while, so I agreed to drive. I was usually pulled out to the countryside daily for something official, but this was mostly a joy ride—a joy ride I was regretting.

I was decked out in my typical “uniform” when leaving the Embassy: jeans, a t-shirt, a sand-colored vest to cover up my Beretta nine millimeter pistol, and an Afghanistan scarf around my neck designed to help me blend in with the populace. I kept my pistol in a quick-release Bianchi holster hidden under my left arm. The quick-release holster was one of the non-issue items I had purchased before deployment, and I was very grateful for it. I never went anywhere without my pistol and three full magazines of hollow point ammo for maximum stopping power.

Robb was dressed in similar garb. If I could have picked anyone to be in this situation with me, it probably would have

been Robb. After all, he was an elite Special Forces soldier, a veteran of numerous wars and skirmishes, and a weapons expert.

As the mob continued to turn ugly, Robb yelled at me, “Roll down your window and pop off a round!”

I would later learn that this was his proven method for dispersing an Afghanistan crowd—the “aggressive scare” method of crowd control. At the time, all I could think was, “Why in the heck is Robb telling *me* to shoot?”

So I yelled back, “Why don’t you?!”

I quickly found out why—Special Forces soldier Robb responded “I didn’t bring a weapon!”

I was in a tight spot with an elite Green Beret weapons expert who didn’t bring a weapon?! Did the Lone Ranger ever leave his six-shooter behind? Did John Wayne ever forget his rifle?! Robb was the guy we all depended on for our weapon needs: machine guns, pistols, submachine guns, whatever was considered necessary. He could get any weapon and type of ammunition our office wanted, and frequently did. In fact, my hollow point ammo (not an Army issue item) was courtesy of Robb and his connections. Yet here he was, our Special Forces weapons expert, caught in this life threatening-situation without a weapon.

Some Special Forces guys became so familiar with the populace that they were prone to be trusting like that. Robb had probably figured that we were doing a routine drop at a school in the middle of nowhere, where he would be improving his local lingo by speaking with the natives (not fighting them off). In sharp contrast to Robb, I was borderline paranoid, constantly looking over my shoulder whenever I left the Embassy, and was always extra alert when I mixed with the Afghanistan population.

As the vehicle rocked back and forth, I ignored Robb's directive to fire a round off. I felt that shooting my weapon would probably incite further problems. However, I did reach into my vest and place my Beretta on "fire" just in case. As I did, my sweaty hand slid on the weapon; I was acting much cooler than I really was, and my body was telling on me. I knew I might have to shoot someone if the Land Cruiser windows started breaking from the mass of moving body parts that were pressing and banging against them. Under our rules of engagement, we were allowed to use deadly force if we felt threatened, and I was starting to get to that point. I said a quick prayer, "God, please help us," as I touched the handle of my Beretta. Still, I didn't want to shoot someone under these circumstances.

When it was looking hopeless, I saw the crowd suddenly

clearing in front of the vehicle. It was the school-master coming to save us. He and two other Afghanistan men were rushing toward us from the schoolhouse, screaming and carrying large, fist-sized rocks. They were pelting the boys in the backs with the sand-colored rocks as they worked their way towards us.

Luckily, the crowd responded to this and loosened their grip on the front of our truck, giving us a little room to move forward. The steering wheel was now super slippery from my sweat. My first instinct was to gun the Land Cruiser—to gather speed and run over people as I tried to maneuver out of the school courtyard. My instinct was encouraged by Robb saying, “Let’s go! Move out of here NOW!”

I managed to contain myself however, so that our Land Cruiser just slowly inched forward as the schoolmaster and his two friends cleared a small path. The schoolmaster and his assistants continued to pick up rocks and throw them at our captors until I was able to move the vehicle about five feet forward without running anyone over. He and his assistants then moved towards the front of the vehicle and walked in front of us as we slowly edged towards the courtyard exit. He was yelling something angrily as he threw the rocks, and the boys were responding with jeers as he broke up their exciting event with hard rocks. The schoolmaster was no doubt motivated to

help us because he wanted the cash delivery we were bringing.

Master Sergeant Robb eloquently said, "F*** this, let's pop smoke...we'll make Hajji come to us to get the money. No payment for them."

Hajji was the term frequently used by GIs to refer to Afghanistan men who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca which was called a Hajj. GIs had quickly adopted the term Hajji to mean all Afghanistan men whether they'd made the pilgrimage or not; kind of like the term "Charlie" in Vietnam. We said goodbye to Hajji as we quickly got on the main dirt road and sped out of the schoolhouse area.

As we drove back to the Embassy in the capital city of Kabul, we debated over what we should have done. Robb insisted, "You should have fired a round off to clear the crowd."

He told me of a recent incident on our Afghanistan Army range that was very similar to the one we had just encountered. In that incident, our Operations Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Rogers, had fired a round in the air first. The crowd did not disband, which forced Rogers to fire a round at one of the mob participants who had grabbed him. He had to shoot the rioter in the leg, which apparently worked as the crowd dispersed quickly. Robb believed shooting first was the best course of

action for Afghanistan mobs.

He continued telling me approvingly, “The only way to persuade Hajji is with force. Why do you think they let us loose?” he asked. “It was because they were getting pelted with BFRs (Army acronym for Big F***ing Rocks)!”

I still disagreed, telling him, “I wasn’t at the point where I was willing to shoot someone or even shoot into the air.”

Robb doggedly restated his position, “You have to use violent actions to stop violent actions. Hajji only responds to the international rules of violence.”

In a way, we were both correct. Our rules of engagement gave us the right to use deadly force if we felt we were in danger, but my military prudence told me never to shoot unarmed rioters. Regardless, we had been lucky to escape with no harm done and no “CNN incident.”

After the schoolmaster got us out of the courtyard, I was able to snap a couple of poor quality digital photos of him yelling at the crowd with rocks in his hands. Why was I capturing the scene with photos, and what the heck was I doing in this situation in the middle of Afghanistan? I was recording my path because of a funny, little, donkey-riding Muslim named Mullah Nasruddin that my path had crossed. But that was after the world had changed for me as an American. Like so many things

in the new millennium, the defining moment of my Afghanistan story began on September 11, 2001.

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That day Hell is produced, that day man will remember; but how will the remembrance help him? He will say, "Oh! If only I had prepared in advance for this life of mine!"

QUR'AN SURAT AL-FAJR: 23-24

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September 11, 2001 changed our country and Army forever. Before 9/11, I was working towards a personal goal to spend more quality time with my family while balancing my demanding career as a military comptroller. Prior to becoming a comptroller, I had been a combat support Military Police officer. As an MP, I had great assignments: platoon leader positions, a couple of company command positions and engaging positions of various kinds while participating in deployments to Germany, France, Croatia, and Bosnia.

In Bosnia, I deployed my company into the combat zone before any other military units with the mission to secure a foothold for the rest of the NATO troops. We called it being on the "pointy end" of the spear. It was during those first few months in Bosnia in late 1995 to early 1996 that I learned the true might and power of the U.S. fighting forces. Our divisions were

frighteningly powerful, overwhelming enough to tame large chunks of countries fairly quickly. My single MP company of only 200 persons possessed enough firepower, communications, and mobility to initially secure the roadways into Croatia, Bosnia, and the river crossing site between them. On television, the Secretary of Defense told the American public that the American military force would be the biggest, meanest dog around...and the military fighting force that my company pushed into Bosnia proved it.

But as an MP, I felt myself increasingly pulled away from my family because of the growing international police actions which had exponentially escalated since Bosnia. Like many soldiers, my family is everything to me. I love my wife and children more than life itself, and the worst thing about deployment is being forced to leave them. I have been married fifteen years to Sheri, my former next-door neighbor and fellow student at Officer Basic Course. We've had two boys along the way, Ike, then twelve years old, and David, then six years old, who are growing up to be warrior gentlemen whom I train in the martial arts. Our family has moved a lot for the Army; Ike has lived in twelve different houses! Moving can be difficult, but in the yin and yang balance of life, it also make our military family stronger than the average American family.

I sometimes think of the Army as a demanding mistress. Powerful, attractive, and exciting, the Army can provide everything an adventurous person desires. But like a needy mistress, the Army demands constant time and energy. Although there are numerous Army programs that support families, the real truth is that families ultimately get in the way. The old Army saying, "If the Army wanted you to have a wife, they'd have issued you one," is still a truism in our world-class Army. The Marine General who was drummed out of the Marines in the '90s for saying he needed *single* Marines was just being truthful.

Ms. Army, just like a demanding mistress, wants all of my time. She wants me while I'm in my prime, physically fit and young, and when she calls, she expects an immediate response. But when I become old and gray, she will replace me with a younger and sharper version.

In pursuing my personal goal to achieve more quality family time, I switched my Army career field from MP to military comptroller at my tenth year of service. As a Captain I had worked a little bit of finance, which earmarked me as a potential comptroller. Comptrollers in the Army are the primary financial advisors to the Commanders, kind of like the chief financial officers for companies. Comptrollers acquire the fiscal

resources through the Defense budget process, analyze how their respective units are spending the dollars, allocate the funds to the various functions within their units, and account for the spending. We serve as the Commanders' principal financial advisors.

When I became a comptroller, I changed from command and leadership jobs to staff and support jobs. It was hard leaving the combat support Military Police Corps where the action and fun are, but I chose family over career. I found comptrollership to be interesting while it also provided me the increased family time that I needed to be a good husband and father.

As a comptroller, I was well-supported by the Army. They sent me to get two master's degrees for comptrollership: one I earned from the University of Nevada and the other from Syracuse University. By the time 9/11 rolled around, I had worked as a full-time comptroller for a few years. But the fateful events of 9/11 would prompt me to leave the family again by volunteering for deployment.

On 9/11, I was in the Pentagon, although I was not assigned there. My boss, Colonel Keanes, and I were there for a couple of days of temporary duty in the Army Budget Office laying out our requirements for more funding when the awful

event happened.

We were in the middle of a briefing when someone from a distant cubicle shouted that a plane had just hit the World Trade Center. I figured that a small plane might have accidentally come close to the World Trade Center or glanced off it, but had no clue that an intentional attack was occurring. In fact, no one in the Pentagon Army Budget Office realized that something serious was happening, so we kept on with our business of briefing our financial requirements while people in nearby cubicles continued with their daily tasks. I remember thinking that the report was highly unlikely and probably false.

Shortly after the first report, we heard somebody shout, “My God, another plane has hit the World Trade Center!” This got our attention and we started asking for more details about the plane crashes. It was about that time that a large cracking boom occurred in the Pentagon. The building shook violently and many of the glass windows shattered, shards spraying to the ground from the force of the blast. In the Army Budget Conference Area, the explosion stunned us as we tried to determine what had happened. Smoke billowed into the offices setting off the alarms, and people ran out of the building. Although we knew that something bad had happened, we didn’t

have any idea that a large jet filled with passengers and fuel had crashed into the Pentagon approximately 150 yards from where we were working.

The Pentagon is extremely large, and the interior can be a confusing maze if you are not familiar with the building. Since I was not assigned to the “puzzle palace,” I became disoriented in the panic and smoke. I remember encouraging Colonel Keanes, who knew his way around, to quickly evacuate the building by nudging him repeatedly in the back. The hallways were thick with people trying to exit the building. There was mass confusion. My Military Police training kicked in as I directed some of the stunned office workers to take their personal belongings out. The clearing teams have an easier job after an evacuation if there are not a lot of personal items left behind. I figured bomb and dog teams would have to be brought in to search the building, and any articles left behind would cause them more trouble when they cleared the Pentagon. Unfortunately, I couldn’t apply my MP training to myself, and had to leave my suitcase and headgear in another part of the building.

The suitcase I left behind provided a liaison officer some amusement after the wreckage was cleared when she called me and asked, “Sir, did you lose a suitcase that contained a pink

pillow?”

“Yes, the green suitcase with the pink pillow is mine, and I would like to get the pillow back if it’s not too smoke damaged.”

I never did recover my hat, but that was okay, I got my pillow. It was my old, feather pillow that was essential to a good night’s rest, no matter what color it was. Little did I know at the time that I would later take that same pillow with me to Afghanistan.

What did I think had happened in the Pentagon? Even after hearing the initial reports about the planes hitting the World Trade Center, I figured that there had been a construction explosion in the basement. The Pentagon was undergoing massive reconstruction, and I assumed one of the dynamite explosions had misfired. This showed how ignorant those of us in the Pentagon were about what was actually occurring. We still thought that it was an accident.

Colonel Keanes and I vacated to the courtyard in the center of the Pentagon. The courtyard is an open-air break area that is sometimes called “Ground Zero” because of the number of Russian nuclear warheads that are targeted at it. In retrospect, it was really dumb to evacuate to a place called “Ground Zero”—

but it does illustrate how unaware we were of the attack. Once in the courtyard, we quickly realized that something awful was happening. As other disoriented people started to arrive at the Pentagon's interior courtyard, we noticed that some were seriously injured with head wounds. But most of the people that I saw looked like they had received only minor cuts from the glass window shards. Somewhere in the mass confusion of the burning Pentagon my future Afghanistan boss, Major General Capo, was displaying heroics by rescuing a fellow soldier out of the wreckage.

In the courtyard, Colonel Keanes noticed a large piece of something silver that looked like bent metal. It was about two feet by one foot in size.

Colonel Keanes said, "Mick, look at that."

I saw what he was pointing to and said, "What is it?"

We walked next to it and Colonel Keanes picked it up. As he picked up the light, shiny piece of metal effortlessly, we realized that it was a piece of fuselage from a plane. At that point, we both decided that we should get the heck out of Ground Zero as fast as possible. We evacuated to the parking lot through a Pentagon alleyway that took us underneath the building.

Once in the large parking area surrounding the Pentagon,

we could clearly see the impact area. A massive fire engulfed the entire side of the Pentagon while thick black smoke billowed high into the air. Fire trucks and emergency vehicles were just arriving. The scene was surreal, one of those moments I'll remember the rest of my life. I realized how lucky we were when I saw the mass devastation caused by the plane and how close it had come to our location. The plane struck in the Army personnel and budget area of the Pentagon.

Keanes said, "Mick, we were darn lucky that didn't hit us."

Fortunately, much of the area the plane hit was unoccupied due to the construction, but 125 Pentagon workers were still killed by the plane crash.¹ After witnessing the damage and talking to other people gathering outside of the Pentagon, we pieced together the news reports and realized it was part of some sort of organized attack. Colonel Keanes and I decided it would be wise to drive our rental car from D.C. back to our Headquarters in Atlanta.

During the lonely drive home, we listened to the news unfold on our radio. The freeway was almost completely empty—eerily silent and devoid of traffic as the entire country paused to take in the horrible events of the day.

I remarked to Keanes, "The whole world is going to know who Osama Bin Laden is. That's bad news for terrorism now that the rednecks in Georgia are alerted."

Osama Bin Laden, or OBL as we called him, was a character that the military was very familiar with, but that the majority of the American populace was unaware of...until 9/11.

Every once in a while a naive civilian friend will send me one of those conspiracy emails that tries to convince people that the Pentagon attack didn't occur, or was staged by the military. I am horrified when I hear Americans say such things, probably the way troops who witnessed the concentration camps must be amazed when people say the Holocaust didn't happen. The Pentagon attack was very real, and most of us in the building were very fortunate the Pentagon is such a solid structure.

Shortly after returning home, my faithful and loyal Labrador Retriever, Reno, passed away. After twelve years of following me all over the globe, he breathed his last breath during our nation's crisis. I felt it was an omen that I should deploy to safeguard our nation in a more direct capacity. As silly as it sounds, our dog Reno was always a main concern whenever I deployed. I worried about my family, of course, but they understood what was happening, where I was going, and when I would return. I could talk to them on the phone or

write to them, and I could do other things for them to make my absence more bearable. But Reno never understood what was happening. He was so loyal to me that he would stop eating whenever I pulled out my duffel bags; and act depressed for days after I left, no matter how much Sheri and the boys tried to tempt him with tasty dog treats. Once Reno passed, I knew there was one less obstacle to my deployment.

