

Chapter Two

We Have a Volunteer

*The course of life is unpredictable. No one can
write his story in advance.*

ABRAHAM HESCHEL

As American mourning turned to blood-lust, I felt the need to do my duty more directly than serving in a support role in the United States, but I was not crazy about going to Afghanistan either. My “news junkie” father called Afghanistan the arm-pit of the world, and I tended to agree. Sheri, my better half, was also against me going. So when an opportunity came up to go to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba as a comptroller for the newly forming prison operations, I jumped on it. This sounded like a good compromise assignment to me. After all, I could fulfill my desire to help, but do it in a lower threat environment than

Afghanistan.

I painted a safe picture of the Cuba assignment for my family so they wouldn't worry. I told them that all the bad guys were under complete control inside large fences and barbed wire where I wouldn't have contact with them; while I, on the other hand, would be surrounded by crystal clear blue water, white sand beaches, tropical drinks, nice Navy housing, and would even eat a Big Mac every now and then from the McDonald's located on Guantanamo. I told people I was volunteering for paradise!

But the way the Army assignment system works, I ended up being diverted at the last minute to a critical "must fill" assignment in Afghanistan. Instead of a volunteer, I became what the Army calls a *voluntold*.

I was reassigned from Cuba because the powers that be in the Army had decided that the mission in Afghanistan was a top priority to fill. Instead of embarking on an island adventure, I was going to the most dangerous spot on the earth. While I had envisioned piña coladas and a tropical paradise, I would be trapped inside protective compounds with no alcohol; and although there would be plenty of sand, there would be no beaches. Now bad guys would be outside the fence looking in

at me. Thanks to Ms. Army, I knew Big Macs would have to be replaced with MREs (meals-ready-to-eat) and an occasional dry piece of goat.

As I communicated with my new assignment contacts, mostly through emails, I began to piece together the mission. The assignment in Afghanistan would be far more rewarding and far more demanding than the assignment in Cuba ever could have been.

My position was to work out of the U.S. Embassy in the capital city of Kabul, Afghanistan, in a secure area called the “Americans Only Area”—an area that had so many electronic locks and security precautions that Agent 007 would have had a tough time getting in. Our offices were right next to the Ambassador’s office in the war ravaged Embassy. I would be working in a small office of uniformed personnel directly under the Ambassador. Our mission was to build a new Army for the provisional government of Afghanistan. We were to do this virtually from nothing.

As I gathered more information from my new Afghanistan Military Office, called the Office of Military Cooperation, I quickly discovered their finance shortcomings. The Office of Military Cooperation was only nine people strong, yet we were

building an Army! We didn't need one comptroller—we needed ten.

My new boss, the Chief of Staff, Colonel Crisp, kept writing me emails simply stating, “We need a comptroller badly. . .we need you now.” No doubt he was right. With about \$400 million dollars soon to flow into the office, they absolutely had to have a comptroller before finances got completely out of control.

Before my assignment, Colonel Crisp's only finance help was a borrowed Transportation Officer on staff who was also trying to act as the money manager. But he was doing so many things at once that he had stopped doing almost anything money-related. I knew they were in tough shape because the Transportation Officer could not answer some fundamental funding questions that I asked him over the phone.

“What is your total budget?” I asked.

“I'm not sure right now,” he hesitatingly answered.

I followed up with, “Who is your funding source?”

Again there was hesitation on his end. Finally, he answered, “I think Central Command.”

The next two times I tried to get information, the Transportation Officer was out receiving donations of equipment from other countries. I couldn't get answers to my simple

questions so I knew my tougher questions would have to be figured out when I hit the ground.

This assignment would be difficult for most comp-trollers of any rank or experience. I was not a comptroller expert; in fact, I was just a journeyman comptroller myself. If the little information I was able to gather about the assignment was true, this would shape up to be the most challenging and rewarding job of my life.

My excitement for the mission was mixed with apprehension about my abilities. My limited comptroller experience in combat situations might haunt me in a position where I was totally responsible for all the financial matters. I knew the rules would be somewhat different than the normal funding regulations and laws, and that I would have to be on the top of my game. After all, I am the 90 percent solution type, the kind of person who is happy to get 90 percent of the solution and then move on to something else. Although the Army had funded two masters' degrees for me, I was one of those students who maintained a B average by making A's to round off any C's I got. I was very happy with a B average, even though I could probably have made A's with a little more work. There was always a certain competitive edge associated with the

pursuit of A's that seemed counterproductive to a true learning atmosphere, at least for me. Since I had plenty of competition in other aspects of my life, I never felt the need to compete in my work or advanced schooling—competition at work seemed to get in the way of making true friends. With that attitude, would I be in over my head in this critical assignment?

I would be working with American taxpayer dollars sent from the United States to the government of Afghanistan specifically allocated for the building of a new National Army. The State Department called this money Foreign Military Financing, or FMF. The money was not only different from any type of funding that I had worked with previously, but very few people had experience with this kind of funding at all so there wasn't much experience in the Army or Department of Defense for this. My best work skill was my ability to figure things out quickly, which was perfect because it was looking like I'd have a lot of figuring out to do.

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A man who won't die for something is not fit to live.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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I had approximately a month to get ready. I knew that during this time I had to prepare professionally and personally. Professionally, I needed to use my predeployment time wisely to research as much as possible on the funding and money issues that I would face. I wasn't deterred by my inability to get information from the Transportation Officer I'd called in Afghanistan. While I was still in the States I buried myself in the training books and resources I could find, knowing I'd be more helpless for information once I hit Afghanistan. I also had to prepare myself as a soldier, ensuring that I had all the war-fighting training, equipment, and medical shots that I would need.

On a personal level, I needed to make sure my mental state was right for deploying into a combat area. But by far, the most important personal issue was ensuring my family would be cared for during my absence. I knew that my two boys would need lots of discipline and love. They would get plenty of love from their mother, but not a fatherly kind of discipline and advice. For that, I talked to our martial arts master who said he would look out for them. Our martial arts school was run by a retired Special Forces First Sergeant who had done three tours in Vietnam. He knew all about

combat and the stresses on families, so he was the perfect disciplinarian figure in my absence. My boys would continue to train in the martial arts with him two to three times a week. It was the perfect setup.

Sheri would be harder to placate. I knew that her work as a probation officer would keep her busy during the day, so I focused on maintaining a presence in her heart. I decided on small love presents for her and the family that could be opened while I was gone. I placed the presents in little bags with the dates of when they could be opened. I dated them once a week so they could open a present from me and feel loved without too much time passing by. They weren't big presents, just little toys and thoughtful gifts. I promised them the biggest gift when I eventually returned from Afghanistan—a new dog.

My buddy gave me a good website for flowers that I would have sent to Sheri at work about once a month. Flowers were the perfect deployment gift for two reasons. The primary reason was so that Sheri would know I loved her and missed her; but an important secondary reason was so that others would know I loved Sheri. All of her Probation Office would see the flowers delivered and know that she was

loved. The deliveries at work were the civilized equivalent of marking my territory on the door jams around her office. All the young lions would know when they were entering my territory, and would stay away from my lioness while I was gone. Even though Sheri would never allow another man into her heart, some men can be awfully aggressive; and I'm borderline paranoid about my family's safety while I'm deployed.

Financially, our family would be okay because of my rank and Sheri's job. Many younger soldiers aren't so lucky and must endure serious economic hardship as a result of war. While service members do receive some additional benefits from deploying, the costs of the deployments usually far outweigh the benefits. Furthermore, I needed to ensure the household was in order in case I didn't return. So I updated my will and took out some additional life insurance. Lastly, I prepared a death note in case I didn't return. This was something I always did before deploying. I wrote a simple note to the family telling them I loved them and that I was sorry I wasn't there. I sealed the note and placed it in our files for Sheri to open if the unspeakable occurred. The note read:

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Sheri,

I assume you are reading this because something bad has happened to me. I am very, very sorry. I want you to know that I love you and the boys more than life itself, and would never want to leave you like this.

You have my love and blessings always. When you feel the time is right, I hope you will love again. You are too wonderful and beautiful a woman to stay a widow. I want you to be happy, and can't in good faith deprive another man of the wonderful blessings your love brings.

Regarding Ike and David, they will be your strength as you grow older. I have two requests. Please keep them training in the traditional martial arts so that they will continue to grow into confident and respectful men. Also, keep them reading the Bible as I'm convinced it is the best manual for navigating life's many obstacles.

As you move on with daily life, always remember my heart and love are with you, Ike and David.

Always yours in love, Mick

