Chapter 10

MORE LETHALITY, LESS LAWYERS

December 9, 2005
East Al Rashid
South Baghdad, Iraq

The wash of the rotor blades taking my platoon on a raid was deafening. I counted nine soldiers in my chalk as we lifted off, three other UH 60s on our tail heading toward the target—all full with Charlie Company's 2nd Platoon.

I slapped my gear to assure myself that I had everything I needed. This had long become an irrational fear. Getting to the objective and not having an essential item became my standing-naked-in-front-of-the-class nightmare. (To this day, I have regular dreams about combat missions where I cannot find my rifle.) Radio traffic blared in both ears like I was running a 911 dispatch center. Company net, platoon comms, and internal pilot conversations interrupted my thoughts.

My GPS was in my leader pouch, my maps in my cargo pocket, my magazines ready. Brass to the grass. Fresh batteries for my night vision and PEQ2 laser aimpoint.

You have everything you need. Just stop it. This is going to be fine. Everything is fine. Just . . . breathe.

I had overplanned. There was nothing I was going to see tonight that would be a surprise. This was my best asset. My platoon was going after the bad guys, and I would be ready. I adjusted my helmet-mounted radio microphone, resting just over my chin strap.

"LT," my Charlie Company First Sergeant Eric Geressy squawked in my ear. He was going with us on this mission, something he did not have to do. Geressy would go on to earn a Silver Star (should be a DSC, but that's a story for another day!) on his next deployment in Iraq. If you entered a laboratory to design the prototypical, badass infantryman, it would be Eric Geressy.

"Choppin 7, this is Choppin 26," I responded by the book.

"Let's go get 'em, National Garbage," he said. Bringing a smile to my face.

"Roger that, Choppin 7. National Garbage out." We were headed out to hunt Al Qaeda tonight.

* * *

Four months ago that was meant to break me down. Make me wish I was back on Wall Street. Now it is a reminder of how far we have come, and how much I've been embraced.

Back at Fort Campbell, a new platoon leader from Princeton, coming from a job on Wall Street, I—as you know—arrived at the unit out of uniform. My platoon sergeant squared me away quickly, personally

taking me to CIF (Army supply)—I don't even know what it stands for, I just know it's where you get all your shit.

A few weeks after arriving at Fort Campbell, we were in Kuwait. Living in giant tents, and fine-tuning our training. My first assignment was the assignment nobody wanted: company equipment layout and accountability. Normally this was the executive officer's (XO) job to handle at the company level, but they often outsource it. So he made sure I got it. The clipboard was handed to me as if this was the equivalent of taking out the garbage. Reading serial numbers in the hot sun. Confirming serial numbers in the hot sun. Writing confirmed serial numbers on the clipboard in the hot sun. Rinse and repeat, all in the hot sun.

It was a shit assignment that every officer hates. But at that moment, I loved it. I was where I wanted to be. I'd rather count every rifle, every radio, and every "sensitive item" in the company one hundred times before I sat my ass on the thirty-eighth floor of Bear Stearns in New York City and crunched numbers on an Excel spreadsheet for boring meetings with really rich bankers.

"Hey, National Garbage, after this layout make sure the fucking radios get filled." First Sergeant Geressy studied me with a squint in his eyes.

The 101st Airborne is one of the most storied divisions in the military. My National Guard time logged was not the least bit impressive to them. They all heard my origin story by now and figured that I was some John Kerry wannabe. A check-the-box, entitled rich kid. On the surface that is exactly how it appeared.

Soon enough, I would face a challenge that would call on all my training and preparation. The rubber was about to meet the road, and the messiness and chaos of modern combat were about to become crystal clear to me. So much of today's media conversations about warfare

are from the perspective of people who have no idea what it's like in a firefight. They're armchair generals, drone aficionados, or micromanaging dilettantes. What I was heading into would forever teach me respect for our soldiers doing impossible jobs in impossible conditions. Video games are definitely *not* combat—nothing clean, clear, or easy about it.

Those days in Kuwait I had an inkling. But it was still in my future. That's why 1SG Geressy was sizing me up. He understood that visceral feeling of leading men in battle. He knew that I had never led men when the bullets broke the sound barrier over your shoulder, sounding like the finale of a Fourth of July fireworks display. He knew I didn't know what it felt like to experience the slim difference between a near miss and a knock on your parents' door from a notification team. He didn't trust me. But did I trust myself? Everything else falls into place when you know who you are and what you are capable of. But, at that point, I still wasn't quite sure—a quiet confidence couldn't shake the disquiet of the unknown ahead.

This was my job now. And we're headed to combat. This wasn't Guantanamo Bay, where I had been deployed the year previous. And I wasn't in New York. There was nothing life-or-death about New York. Sinatra famously sang—in "New York, New York": If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere. He was full of shit. Subways replaced by Humvees, briefcases with body armor, and the white noise buzz of air-conditioning replaced with the rotors of helicopters. The smacking of a coworker eating his lunch at his desk exchanged for a M240B machine gun eating belt-fed rounds as the red tracers spit up dirt downrange.

One day while training stateside another lieutenant from Charlie Company took me aside and said, "They are going to come at you. They will come at you and figure out who you are. Just let your

competence speak for itself, or at least show that you are listening to your NCOs. You will make people believe you are ready when we go downrange."

Over and over, I told myself:

Don't stop training. We're going to do more training. We're going to train every one of these guys on more medical combat lifesaver, more react-to-contact drills, more trigger time. I want the guys to do another rotation through the shoot house. With night vision. And white light. More and more. I need more, so I don't let these guys down.

I chose to be here. I practically begged to be here. I'd made the bureaucratic drug deal of the century to get here. No menial task would make me quit or stand down. I loved it all. Throw more retard-level clipboard tasks at me, and I'll keep throwing them right back at you—performing novice-level tasks with the anal-retentive dedication of a paranoid Princeton graduate.

When we arrived in Iraq, someone would inevitably ask me, "Hegseth, you played basketball at Princeton for Coach John Thompson, right?"

"Yes, I did."

"You guys ran the Princeton offense, right? Did you play in the Big Dance—the NCAA Tournament?"

"Yes, we did."

No one wanted 1LT Hegseth playing Division 1 basketball either. Every day I showed up, a low-level recruit from nowhere Minnesota, determined to outshoot, outhustle, and outwork anyone. On the junior varsity team, I hovered for two long years. Earning Coach Thompson's trust was a Herculean task. My goal was to make not playing me tough, or at least ignoring me impossible. It took eighty points across two JV games my sophomore year to get an eyebrow raised. Never giving up in practice and playing defense against the starting five—for hours and

hours—made me dependable. Never quitting and planning out the opponent's reaction to our game plan during coaching sessions made me invaluable to the team.

By my senior year, Coach Thompson would stroll over to the bench during an opening moment in the game. Without taking his view from the court, he would ask, "What do you see, Hegseth?"

"Their zone is soft along the baseline. If we can rotate the ball and get it there, we'll get people open cutting to the middle when they have to guard the baseline. And from there, we can pop the ball out for open threes."

Coach Thompson finally broke his gaze off the court to smile at me with a nod of his head. It took years to gain the trust of the son of coaching royalty—and a damn good coach in his own right. Didn't hurt that I was a son of a high school basketball coach. And wouldn't you know that when the defense was stretched, they broke down, and our open shooting guard drained a three.

I belonged here, even if nobody ever seemed to fully appreciate it.

* * *

Exhaust and whirling rotors hypnotize me into another place far away from here. I have to break myself out of it when I hear the crew chief animatedly get my attention.

"Two minutes, sir. Two minutes to LZ," he cracked over the internal headset of my bird.

Thirty-six hours ago, I got word our platoon had been selected for this mission. When I got the Warning Order (WARNO), I was walking on air. Exhilaration that we would be doing something meaningful and kinetic. Pulling every satellite map I could find from the TOC (Tactical Operations Center), I pored over the contours, the target reference

points (TRP), the phase lines, the features that I could easily recognize if the worst-case scenario occurred.

Two weeks earlier, my platoon sat in ramshackle guard towers, wasting away in the heat and dust. Aimlessly spitting tobacco juice and sunflower seeds into Halliburton Hesco barriers at the front gate playing "Fuck, Marry, Kill" with the cast of *Friends*. Everyone was frustrated by how we were being used by our battalion and brigade. *I just spent a year guarding terrorists at Guantanamo Bay, how in the world did this unit end up on that same duty in Iraq?* When missions started coming into the S3 (our operations shop) for high-value target raids, the entire Charlie Company chain of command screamed, "We're here, we've got the assets. Use us, please."

In 2005, much of Baghdad was run by the Army National Guard. Our area of operation, FOB Falcon in the East Rashid neighborhood of the city, was also patrolled by a National Guard unit. They were taking heavy losses. The unit's battalion commander was killed by a roadside bomb; he was killed while responding to the death of one of his company commanders. It was bad. That year 844 Americans would lose their lives, half of them coming from improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Baghdad was a meat grinder.

I was changing my radio battery in the main TOC when I heard those deaths called in. These guys were facing a buzz saw every day—and you could see it on their faces every time they rolled through one of our gates. There was nothing we could do for them; it wasn't our battlespace. We were only allowed to overwatch the two hundred meters outside the perimeter of our FOB, and maintain base security. We left the wire to find mortar and rocket teams and clear out adjacent buildings. That was it.

At night, units started to notice a string of gruesome street killings, mostly sectarian in nature. However, with the insurgency starting to

boil up, these discoveries were all under the surface. Streets, patrolled all day, would be littered with civilian bodies by the middle of the night. Hands tied. Close-ranged handgun wounds to the side or back of the head. Women, men, even children. Units that saw no visible sign of enemy contact would routinely roll up six to ten dead bodies on the street. They appeared out of nowhere. Killed in another area of Baghdad. East Rashid was just the dumping ground for the day's kill.

Finally, with the battlespace getting more and more dangerous by the day, our company's lobbying for action proved successful. My 2nd Platoon was tasked for a "kill/capture" mission. An Al Qaeda terror cell—mortarmen—had been wreaking havoc in the area. Our job was to catch them by surprise in the middle of the night and kill or capture them.

Speaking of "kill or capture," the rules of engagement in Iraq in 2005 were complicated, confusing, and sometimes upside down. Different units had different policies, even though there was supposed to be one, uniform standard. Different unit missions, different leadership ethos, different areas of operation, and different enemy tactics equals lots of confusion. So upon arrival in Iraq, we were briefed by a judge advocate general (JAG)—an Army lawyer—regarding the latest "in theater" rules of engagement. Needless to say, no infantrymen like Army lawyers—which is why JAG officers are often not so affectionately known as "jagoffs." There are some good ones out there, but most spend more time prosecuting our troops than they do putting away bad guys. It's easier to get promoted that way.

Near the end of this particular jagoff's talk, he used the example of an identified enemy holding a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG):

"Do you shoot at him?" The JAG officer stood in front of my platoon with his arms folded.

And my guys were like, "Hell, yeah, we light him up."

"Wrong answer, men. You are not authorized to fire at that man, un-

til that RPG becomes a threat. It must be pointed at you with the intent to fire. That makes it a legal and proper engagement."

We sat in silence, stunned.

After this briefing I pulled my platoon together, huddling amid their confusion to tell them, "I will not allow that nonsense to filter into your brains. Men, if you see an enemy who you believe is a threat, you engage and destroy the threat. That's a bullshit rule that's going to get people killed. And I will have your back—just like our commander. We are coming home, the enemy will not. That's our view. We're not going to kick down doors and just start shooting people, but we're going to be aggressive."

As I've shared, Colonel Michael Steele was our brigade commander—and he was a certified badass. He suffered no fools. If you engaged the enemy and destroyed it under his command, you got a "kill coin." Colonel Steele would have been a horrible gender studies professor at the University of California, but there was nobody you wanted more in a combat situation. Because of his tenacity and leadership under fire, many boys and girls are being raised by their veteran fathers, instead of visiting their graves.

* * *

The fastest two minutes of my life sped by as I felt the Black Hawk skids rest down onto the ground of our landing area. The voice of the pilot was a bit uneasy, but I didn't know any better. Something felt a bit off. That was the smoothest touchdown I have ever experienced in a UH-60. We didn't pop or bounce down. We sunk. Like an Oreo in milk. Just plopped down.

Nine members of my platoon poured out of the UH-60 under the heavy wash of the Black Hawk rotors. I could see the other three roar

down near me. I instantly felt the cold temperature. It was December in Iraq—warm during the day, but the desert heat gives way to chilly nights. The temperature drop had a bite to it because all of our senses were up.

I started looking around as the platoon piled out of the last UH 60 and the birds were immediately outbound. At first it was roaring loud, and with every passing second the scene got quieter and quieter. Then, silent. Only the soft sound of small movements. I'll never forget that moment of quiet; it's still where my mind goes today when I'm outside, at night, in the quiet.

As the men take a knee and begin to scan targets, I pull out my GPS with the waypoints preprogrammed. I see the green screen of death. The GPS was nonoperational. I turn it on and then off.

No way this is happening. Come on. Come on.

We are in Indian country—no-man's-land, controlled by the enemy—*and my equipment decides to shit the bed!?* I checked the batteries twice, I know they're good.

Without hesitation I pop back to my hours poring over the terrain on my cot at FOB Falcon. Looking up I see the minaret of the mosque to the northwest. I identified that as one of my "oh shit reference points." I compare that spot with the bearing on my compass. I look at my map.

Okay, we need to get five hundred meters to the east of that wall.

Nothing was easy in Iraq. And this night was just getting started. It's nearly pitch black—although a partial moon aided our night-vision goggles—and we are going to use nothing but terrain features to get to the target house.

Since this was our first mission, the company leadership team, the Charlie Company commander and first sergeant, were right beside me. Everyone assured me that this was *my* mission to run. My entire chain of command was present, but I was leading this assault. I knew the details.

I knew the maps. And, as such, I felt the pressure of the moment weigh on me. I did my best to beat my own monstrous expectations down and focus on the mission.

My boots sank three inches into the thick muck of a farmer's field before I realized that we were at least half a kilometer from where we were supposed to be dropped. *Those damn pilots dropped us in the wrong spot!* Add that to the five hundred meters I was already rerouting, based on the terrain I had memorized, and I knew that this mission was already off to a rough start.

In every Hollywood movie there is a slow-motion shot of the heroes stepping off the bird and moving toward the objective. The astronauts walking slowly to the rocket ship. The cowboys slowly moving toward vengeance. I had long envisioned my platoon's moment in a similar manner, but after I gave the order to space out and move by squad formation in a modified wedge, every guy's boots lodged in the vacuum-like suck of the Iraqi farmer's plowed muck. Taking extreme effort to lift and plant, soldiers began toppling over, the clank of link ammunition rattled, the clatter of weapon systems and gear smashing. Soldiers were dropping one after another in this mud field of manure and overirrigated soil.

D-Day plus three minutes and it was already a cluster. We were briefed that the terrain in our LZ was hardball solid. Instead, we got dropped in mud.

The squad leaders moved their fire teams to cover and I spotted a dirt road that would get us moving in the right direction. I was *pretty sure* we were moving in the right direction. I decided to box, or avoid, the dangerous open areas and to skirt the main roads, to make up time. We were farther away than we had planned, and needed to make up time. We didn't have time to beat brush. Speed could preserve our element of surprise, so speed would be our security.

The soldiers moved, following my guidance. There was no hesitation. It was the most special moment I'd ever experienced. Looking at these men. Strong. Tough. From Nowhereville, America, just like me. My men. They all look different. Different races, and different dialects. But all normal dudes. They're all individuals—but not tonight. In the here and now, when a crack of a Dragunov sniper rifle could end anyone's life at any moment, we are one. No excuses, no medications, no women—just men. Men trained to fight. Men tough as nails. Men, with no distractions.

I knew exactly what they could do. They earned this place, their ranks and their positions. We snaked along the country road like we trained for. One hundred percent commitment. One hundred percent in it for each other. If Lucifer himself were on the other side of the street, these thirty-seven men would have run headlong into the fire for each other.

The old Army infantry adage is "slow is smooth, smooth is fast." And this has been gospel to many infantry units for generations of battle. However, fast is also fast and I made the assessment that our best security would be to speed onto the objective. The men dashed across intersections, each time holding ground to pull security for the next soldier to pass.

The morning we got the WARNO telling us to be on standby for this mission, I immediately started studying the satellite intelligence imagery and vehicle movement signatures that had pegged the hide house for this rocket team that was launching 107mm Soviet-made rockets in and around Baghdad. I studied everything around that house, and the surrounding houses. I knew the neighborhood better than my neighborhood in New York.

In Iraq, the 107mm rocket was akin to the Katyusha rocket of the Soviet era. It was normally fired off the back of a flatbed truck. If unidentified, the truck could fire and quickly speed off. If tracked, they were fish in a barrel to be taken out from above. Our mission was to kill or capture the rocket team. We were expecting four to six bad guys in this cell. It consisted of an older, gray-haired cell leader and possibly three to four younger mortarmen.

Thirty minutes into the movement, my platoon found itself in the backyard of a house about fifty meters from our target house. We were already ten minutes behind where I thought we would be at this point. I heard a dog barking on the other side of the wall where two of my squads awaited my next order. My element was split in half, with one section of the platoon in the courtyard of the house next to our target and the other on another piece of property. Then another dog reported back.

Within a half minute, a few neighborhood canines were ralphing out danger with bellowing, baritone yelps. The Iraqi version of ADT had just been tripped. The lights at a nearby house lit up, and we could hear brush ruffling. The time in the hourglass was pouring fast in my head.

For the first time in months, Wall Street seemed like a good gig.

This was decision time.

Using hand and arm signals, we quickly informed the adjacent squads to form a hasty wedge. Whispering into the radio, I told the back element to form a file to follow directly behind the leading formation's wedge. We were going to send a two-squad infantry arrow formation into our target compound. Three to five meters of separation between each soldier, with clear and open firing lanes to their left and right, we would move quickly. The other two squads were overwatching the objective from an adjacent vantage point. The lead wedge would establish security and hold that security to cover the file that would go immediately to the back door of the target house (we assessed early on that this was the best entrance). Each job transferred over to the next guy without

saying a word. Training, trust, muscle memory. This was instinct to our unit.

If we made contact before we entered the target home, all soldiers would react to any enemy fire. They would lay down suppression fire and assault, or envelop, the enemy's base of support. A leader in combat isn't giving instruction to each piece of the team. We give formations and plays. Soldiers make the decisions as to how best to maneuver. My job was to be in a position to best coordinate battle movements, and in this mission I felt I needed to be near the front of the formation to make the right calls.

Six short months ago, I thought pitch meetings were stressful.

The hope was to gain ground with time to spare, breach the entry, establish security, and gain a foothold. If three to five insurgents presented a threat, our spacing and automatic fire would cut them down or immediately suppress them to a hasty cover. Although this was not exactly my original plan, which gave me some pause, I liked these odds.

Just go with it.

I keyed my radio and whispered into my headset mic, "First and Second Squads, this is 26. Target house, eleven o'clock. Fifteen meters. On me. Go. Go. Go."

As it happens, as the men moved, I found myself as the third man in the stack on the initial entry into the house. It is not ideal, nor Field Manual desired, for a platoon leader to be in a stack entering and clearing an insurgent layer. Statistically it's not usually the first man in the stack who receives hostile direct fire during a breach in a close quarter battle. The number two man gets hit most of the time and the number three man about 10 percent of the time. That will just have to be the roulette spin for tonight.

We kicked the door open and the teams overlapped responsibilities exactly as we had trained. It went flawlessly and I took great pride at

how quickly they dominated the building's first floor. The men moved quickly from night vision to white light.

We found children. We found women. We caught them still sleeping, only fully awakened after our lights danced on their bodies.

We quickly established that there were no military-age males in the home. But many did live here.

I noticed some of my veteran soldiers—who had done a previous tour—talking. I was leading this assault, but they had valuable insight. I listened to First Sergeant Geressy as he approached me calmly.

"Whatcha thinking, LT," First Sergeant asked.

Coach Thompson would stroll over to the bench during a tense moment in the game. Without taking his view from the court, he would ask, "What do you see, Hegseth?"

"First Sergeant, dry hole. Nobody's here. We're searching for everything. Three hours from the sun coming up. What do we do? All we found was this ammo box. Nothing they aren't allowed to have."

"No way, LT Hegseth. You did well. See that little green ammo box the boys brought you by the stairs." First Sergeant Geressy pointed with a helmet nod.

An NCO ran over to pick it up from a table and brought it back over to us to further examine with white light. That foreign writing turned out to be Chinese.

"That's called a Type 63 scope. Used primarily for . . ."

"—a 107mm rocket launcher. The Iranians use these for the Haseb rockets too," an NCO on his second tour finished the first sergeant's answer.

The determination in my first sergeant's eyes matched mine. He trusted me. After all the tests, he and the company commander, Dan Hart, gave my platoon this mission and trusted me to lead it. And now he was fully invested with his soldiers to finish the mission.

"We got ourselves exactly what we came here to get. Now we just need to find them."

"What do you suggest," I asked him.

"I am asking you, LT." First Sergeant looked into my eyes.

This is it. You earned this moment. Think. Breathe. You belong here.

"I am not sure that gun sight would be effective if they are hitting built-up areas."

"Now you are thinking, LT."

"So this guy is either stupid or maybe just . . ."

"Maybe just a guy who keeps gear because it's cool? And doesn't realize Americans are smart and this just gave away his operation." First Sergeant knew all these answers already.

"This isn't the cell leader. No way."

First Sergeant Geressy smiled at my realization. I earned his respect and now together we were planning. In a fight, rank was merely ceremonial. Leaders are leaders, regardless of pay grade or age. Experience and integrity are far more important.

"This guy, the guy who lives here is just a punk. Who fills tubes and fires shots." First sergeant was teaching me as he was thinking out loud. Realizing he had a student listening to every word he uttered he continued methodically.

"Which means, we can squeeze this dude. And he will talk."

"We just have to find him. He is probably long gone, right?" I asked first sergeant.

"He will be as long as he thinks we are," first sergeant said as he moved the curtain from the front window. Looking out of the house, he turned to me. From there he sped up his tempo of conversation. School time was over. First sergeant was in execution mode.

"We take one squad, plus three men. Back to exfil. Black Hawks take them back to the FOB. Send all four birds to pick them up. Sir,

ALL FOUR BIRDS COME TO LAND. Few get inside. Make it loud. Make it obvious. Make it stupid. This is the entire point. The rest of your platoon, automatic riflemen preferably, stay right here with you and me." He smiled assumingly.

I looked over the men. This would be like cutting players on your team. They all trained hard and wanted this as badly as anyone. Finally, I decided on one squad. The rest stayed behind. The UH-60s would be inbound as soon as I radioed to the TOC. The plan was underway.

One squad left, making lots of noise as they did so. Lots of spacing, looking like a larger element. As they did, we turned off all the lights in the house and the courtyard. Soon after, the loud noise of Black Hawks overtook the area. Roughly ten soldiers got on board, spacing out into all four Black Hawks. The PZ (pickup zone) was different from our original LZ (landing zone) so the enemy likely did not have surveillance on that location.

With the noise of outbound Black Hawks in the background, the lights out, and the house silent, we set up a kill zone. With automatic weapons overlapping fields of fire with the front driveway and down the road. Concealed, ready. And there we waited. We kept our medic in a room with food and water with all the women and children. All cell phones were confiscated. Safe, quiet, and all in one area of the home. The house was dark, no lights on.

From the soldiers who had deployed before, we knew that military-aged males often slept in different houses—or fled to a safe house at the sound of any aircraft, drones, or troops. We also knew that, after coalition forces raided enemy-held terrain, their occupants usually returned home the moment the coast was clear. This was cited time and time again by other veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. The dogs always returned to their vomit to smell around.

Humvees are loud. Bradley Fighting Vehicles make some disturbing

noise. Nothing compares to the roar of one Black Hawk helicopter. Four send a message.

America has left the neighborhood.

We waited, in darkness.

Just under an hour later, two men strolled up the driveway, looking around for any signs of Americans in hiding.

This was like Publishers Clearing House dropping off a big carboard check at our front door. For an hour we were watching . . . and then the adrenaline immediately spiked. I was excited. This was the type of moment I had wanted. A yearlong deployment to Guantanamo Bay promised some action. But it was minimal, mostly watching Al Qaeda terrorists playing soccer and eating sandwiches. All we wanted was to take part of the kinetic action that made a difference. This was my first time out on mission leading an element. And these two fools walking into the house made my heart pump out of my interceptor ballistic vest.

Our guys were good, and the two insurgents were unarmed. As they approached the door, soldiers swarmed them from all sides. We threw them down, threw on zip ties, and whisked them into the house. No lights. No loud noises. If more were coming, we didn't want to tip them off.

The edifying nature of watching these arrogant thugs just walking toward the driveway, thinking they were good to go, and the looks on their faces when a squad of boys from Tennessee and Kentucky popped out was a life-changing moment for me.

'Merica, fuck yeah.

Two more times that night—about twenty minutes apart—two men strolled down the driveway. They got the same treatment. Bagged, gagged, searched, processed. None of them had any idea we were still there. We got in our licks but had a larger objective in mind.

A couple of the names and identification matched our target lists. Now we needed them to sing. First Sergeant Geressy earned all the rope and latitude he demanded. He did some "on-site interrogation" and one of the men tossed up a name and address down the road. We knew these two were both low men on the chain and the bigger fish was out there.

Quickly, it was revealed that our "big man" was the old man down the road. He was the cell leader. That turned the night around. We were in the bonus round and these points were double. But the sun was about to come up, and the neighborhood would soon know that "the Americans" were still here.

Working on the actionable intelligence from a very startled mortarman in custody, we put together an ad hoc group that moved tactically down the road, raided the house, and found the older male cell leader. He came out of the house, acting like a local farmer. He smiled and thanked us for keeping him safe. Our interpreter was wise to the ruse. That's all I needed to hear, and we took him down immediately.

Immediately, the cell leader was no longer cooperative. What was his name? Was he a member of Al Qaeda? Where were his weapons? He wasn't talking, but we knew we had our man.

This is where my guys took over. They turned the house upside down, but found nothing. So they started searching the banks of the river—into the tall grass. Even I thought, what the hell are they going to find over there? Lo and behold, on a steep bank along the river they found a hole, covered by a tarp, and covered by tall grass. Jackpot, the weapons and ammo cache. AK-47s, mortar rounds, mortar tubes, remote controls . . . the mother lode. This mortar cell was built not to be found. Safe house in one place. Living quarters in another (that's what we originally raided). Cell leader elsewhere. And weapons underground, along the banks of the river.

The sun was now up. The neighborhood was waking up. We moved quickly. We consolidated our detainees and evidence at the original house and moved out to a hasty PZ. The four birds came back, and we loaded in—Al Qaeda hog-tied and at our feet. The feeling on this ride was different. As the Black Hawks lifted off, my body swelled with relief. All men accounted for. Mission complete.

* * *

On our platoon's first salvo outside the wire, we harvested real bad guys. Wanted, hunted, known bad guys. We discovered and removed a weapons cache. That feeling was greater than any game-winning bucket I had ever shot in my lifetime.

For our mission, the members of my team and I received awards and recognition. That was an honor, but that was not what made that night special to me. What we did together was more important than any recognition could affirm. We adapted. We overcame obstacles. We trusted each other to make decisions that would push the objectives to accomplish our mission. We had our mission success and we put the leader of the terrorist cell and a cache of deadly rockets on ice. We were not individuals: we were a team.

Modern war is defined by ambiguity. The enemy never wears uniforms. The enemy uses women and children as shields—daily. Life-and-death decisions are made at a moment's notice—impacting lives forever. It's messy, almost always.

Ask any combat veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Later in my deployment, I watched Al Qaeda fighters bleed out after a firefight. Should we render aid? Or get real-time intelligence before he breathes his last breath?

We did both. As he was whisked away in the back of a pickup truck,

he was an afterthought. Did he live or die? I didn't care then, and I don't care today. He was shooting at us, and our Iraqi allies, so any aid rendered would be grace enough.

My unit experienced devastating scenes back in 2005 and 2006 in Iraq. Confusion and fear surrounded us from all sides. But whenever my guys shot, they did so for a reason. We were in a war, with a mission to fight against a shadowy enemy. Second-guessing was deadly.

I was tasked with releasing Iraqi men who we knew had American blood on their hands. The jagoff lawyers told us we had to do it.

Bet Grandad didn't do that in Normandy.

At the end of my tour—months later!—my last assignment was to fly back to Baghdad and testify against the old man that we rolled up on our first mission outside the wire before I could return home stateside.

That was modern warfare.

That's also how slow the gears of justice worked during the war. The intel we handed over was exploited and good. But lawyers got involved as they did at Gitmo, as they did in Afghanistan, and as they did here. Again, we played by rules—many of them stupid rules, resulting in terrorists walking the streets to kill and kill again.

Did we think about taking justice into our own hands?

Sure we did.

The only thing that truly keeps me up at night is wondering whether those jihadists went on to kill more Americans. Because modern warfighters fight lawyers as much as we fight bad guys. Our enemies should get bullets, not attorneys. The fact that we won't do what is necessary is the reason wars become endless. Modern wars never end, because we won't finish them.

Did my platoon, on that night, have any extremists in our midst? Nope. Just a bunch of Americans—with political viewpoints across the spectrum and skin colors from every share of a Crayon box—united in

a shared mission. We were not the extremists; we hunted them. When American troops are given a mission, the men to do it, and the backing of leaders to execute—they will win. That is what modern wars taught me about future wars. That is why I'm with the warfighters—the trigger pullers—every single time. I will have their back, through thick and thin. They will make mistakes, but almost always for the right reason: to bring more of our boys home.

That is our mission. The rest we can't change. That's up to politicians. Our job is to kill the enemy—and when we get rid of the bullshit consuming our military right now, we are the best in the world.

Chapter 11

THE LAWS OF WAR, FOR WINNERS

As I mentioned, I still wake up in the middle of the night with a reoccurring dream. I'm on a mission with my unit, in enemy territory. But I'm racked with anxiety. Where is my weapon? I can't find my rifle. I'm hoping nobody will notice, as I do everything I can do to find my weapon. It's lost. I'm helpless.

It's an irrational dream, but I can't shake it. I've never lost my weapon in combat, or training. But I know what the consequence would be. Not only would I be combat ineffective and receive universal scorn, but it would also be career ending (or career-altering, at best). If a junior leader, or any combat troop, loses their weapon—they throw the book at you. Loss of position, loss of rank, loss of pay. The Army will hold you accountable, that much a soldier can count on. Other services, with other "sensitive items," do the same thing.

My unit in Iraq once cleared an entire city to try to find a 240B machine gun that had been lost in a complex IED ambush conducted on our