

Introduction

FEARLESS?

U.S. ARMY RANGERS DON'T GET SCARED. WE'VE MADE A name for ourselves as the fearless ones. We're a tough, disciplined, quick-strike force that parachutes or helicopters into nasty situations, kicks down doors, captures the bad guys, and forces openings for the rest of the army to follow—hence our motto, “Rangers Lead the Way.”

Give us the hardest, most dangerous, most challenging mission you can think of. We'll take it on. We're the elite—fewer than half a percent of all active-duty soldiers. We go where others are not able or not trained to go. We instinctively run *toward* the fight, not away from it.

At least that's the mystique. Line up any one hundred guys who have served successfully in the Ranger Regiment and ask if they've ever been afraid. You'll get no takers.

We stand in the long, proud line of those Rangers who first pushed onto Omaha Beach on D-Day back in 1944. It was Rangers who scaled straight up the ninety-foot cliffs of Pointe-du-Hoc that day to knock out a nest of 155-millimeter German cannons that were holding off the Allied invasion.

THE ROAD TO UNAFRAID

It was Rangers who jumped onto the airfields of Grenada (1983), taking on the enemy with no backup for hours. We Rangers did the same in Panama (1989). We were the ones who came oh-so-close to breaking the back of Somali warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid and restoring sanity to that desperate country (1993)—until our government pulled us out. If you've read Mark Bowden's excellent bestseller *Black Hawk Down* or seen the Academy Award-winning movie, you know all about that. In this book, I'll give you my take on what happened there.

Along the way I may surprise you by admitting that I've been afraid more than once or twice during my thirteen-plus years in the Ranger Regiment. That may upset some people. But it's true.

I've felt the same fears as those who've never worn the uniform. Fear of death. Fear of losing your most valued relationships. Fear of running out of money. Fear of getting sick. Fear of violence. Fear of embarrassment. These happen all across the human spectrum.

How we handle our fears makes a huge difference. We can let them paralyze us, or we can find the courage to rise above them. Through my experiences, I share some extreme examples of facing threats and overcoming the panic they generate inside. My hope is to encourage you in your private battles.



A U.S. military firebase somewhere in Afghanistan during the Global War on Terrorism.

One

A SMALL PROBLEM

IT WAS A SUNDAY AFTERNOON, BUT I CAN ASSURE YOU nobody was taking a nap. Earlier thoughts about organizing a volleyball game in the warm sun at our Mogadishu airport compound by the ocean were long forgotten. Intelligence was now saying we had a golden opportunity to catch not one but two high aides to Mohamed Farrah Aidid, the warlord who was basically ruining Somalia.

This desert country on the tip of northeast Africa didn't just have a bad government, it had not had a functioning government at all for the past two years. If you wanted to mail a letter, there was no postal system to accept or deliver it. If you had a child who needed schooling, there was no such public institution. If you were in trouble and needed a police officer for protection, you'd better have a bribe ready.

It was such a shame, because as I had looked around Mogadishu, I couldn't help thinking it had the potential to be one of the world's great resort cities. The gentle breezes off the Indian Ocean, the sandy beaches, the warm sunshine—it all compared to the French Riviera. Instead, it was currently shot to pieces, totally trashed, the

most violent place on earth. Only the mosques seemed to have been spared.

Aidid and his competitors ran daily life through sheer force, controlling the drug trade and choking off the world's food aid as soon as it arrived in the port. He had a sinister scheme for getting and keeping fighters. His policy was simple: free drugs if you'll join my militia. As a result, he had recruited thousands of desperate young men who stayed high much of the time. The average Somali lived in daily fear—more than two million had been driven from their homes, and three hundred thousand had starved to death.

The United Nations had commissioned us, along with troops from several other nations, to take care of this bully once and for all, ushering him toward a trial for crimes against humanity. In the two months Task Force Ranger had been in Mogadishu, we'd already conducted six raids into the dusty, chaotic city, nabbing key players in Aidid's militia each time. Cooperative Somalis who wanted a better life for their country fed us tips on where to look. Soon our small helicopters swooped down from the sky to drop special operators on the designated rooftop or in alleys nearby. They kicked in the doors, immediately threw flash-bang grenades to stun everyone inside, and then handcuffed them with flexbands before the targets knew what hit them.

Meanwhile, Rangers were already arriving on the larger Black Hawk helicopters, which hovered thirty feet or so over each of the four corners of the block. Three-inch ropes were flung downward, and Rangers slid down to the street like firefighters descending a station pole—a maneuver called "fast-roping." The instant the Rangers hit the ground, they took control of the intersection, thereby setting up a controlled perimeter that no one could penetrate.

This rectangle stayed in place until a column of vehicles rolled up to the door of the target building to load up the captured. Normally this was my mission to lead. The Rangers at the four corners, on receiving a radio signal, collapsed back in our direction to jump on the convoy themselves, along with the special operators. We raced out of the neighborhood before most people even had a clue what was going down.

TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

On the afternoon of October 3, 1993, we received word that a high-level meeting was under way at a certain three-story building on Hawlwadig Road, just a block north of the Olympic Hotel. Sunday was a normal business day in this Muslim country; their day of worship is Friday. At this meeting, not one but *two* of the big shots were supposedly present: Omar Salad, Aidid's top political adviser, and Abdi "Qeybdid" Hassan Awale, his interior minister. What a lucky break!

Yes, it would have been nicer not to have to go in during the late afternoon, when crowds of people were around and paying attention. We'd rather have done this raid during the night or early morning, of course. But the opportunity for a two-fer was too good to pass up.

"Struecker, you know how to find this place?" Lieutenant Colonel Danny McKnight asked as we stood in the JOC (Joint Operations Center). By studying satellite maps, I had become something of an expert in the geography of the city. It was a challenge, since no street signs existed, and you definitely weren't going to get help from MapQuest or AAA. But gradually I had built up my memory bank of local landmarks and what streets led where.

“Yes, sir,” I replied. “I’ve driven by there several times. It’s just a few blocks east of the Bakara Market, which is not the most pleasant neighborhood for us, as you know. But we can definitely get there.” This was the heart of Aidid territory, where open-air booths sold everything from cucumbers to rugs to rifles.

“Okay. We’re moving out in ten minutes. Birds lift off first, and you’ll be heading up the road almost immediately after.” That was the way it usually ran for Ranger missions; we had to be ready to go on very short notice.

While the helicopters were loading up, I lined up the ground column at the gate. My Humvee (army-talk for HMMWV, High Mobility Multi-Wheeled Vehicle—in other words, the prototype for what eventually became the Hummer in today’s auto marketplace) would lead the way, with young Private First Class Jeremy Kerr as my driver. He was getting all kinds of new experience here in Somalia—first time to drive a military vehicle, first time to wear night goggles. Everything was a steep learning curve for Jeremy.

In the back, behind a metal bomb protection plate, was Sergeant Dominick Pilla, the best machine gunner I’d ever seen. He was a big, funny guy from “New Joyzee,” whose practical jokes and skits kept the entire battalion entertained. Beside him was young Specialist Tim Moynihan, a bongo-playing guy with thick black hair who could have grown a great-looking beard had regulations allowed. He was well-liked and popular among all the guys.

Up on top in the turret was Private First Class Brad Paulson manning the big .50 caliber machine gun. He was a small-sized fellow from the Midwest who almost looked young enough to still be in high school, except for his “high-and-tight” military haircut. I thought of him as a kid brother.

Right behind our vehicle was the other half of our squad in a second Humvee, led by my right hand, Sergeant Danny Mitchell. His super-slow Arkansas drawl made some people assume he wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, which, in fact, was opposite of the truth. I soon realized he was qualified to fill in for me at any time. We'd worked together a long time and could almost read each other's minds. He was incredibly loyal and would do anything I asked.

Next came more Humvees and three five-ton flatbed trucks for holding lots of people—a total of twelve vehicles in all. I was the lead navigator, while Lieutenant Colonel McKnight, farther back in a Humvee, would be calling the main plays.

We roared out of the gate as soon as the signal came that the helicopters, already in the air, were about to launch their assault. The distance to cover was no more than a four-minute drive into the sandy, garbage-littered streets of Mogadishu. We dodged burned-out vehicles along the way and swerved around piles of loose tires, old furniture, and wood scraps that residents had set on fire to draw attention to previous gun battles. I found it odd that instead of running away from trouble, the residents almost seemed magnetized by it, coming out of their crumbling houses to get in on the action.

As we got close to the hotel, I instructed Jeremy Kerr to turn right. Actually, I spoke a block or two too soon. It was the only wrong turn I took during my whole time in Somalia. The confusion was quickly remedied, however, and the whole convoy reassembled behind the hotel—a five-story white building with lots of balconies—to await our next move.

We heard shots in the distance; it was clear that the Rangers at the four corners were taking fire from Aidid's hidden militia. They

weren't about to let us capture their leaders unchallenged. Battered pickup trucks with their backs full of rifle-waving militia began screeching around corners.

But at the target house, things were progressing smoothly. The time for extraction of the bad guys was almost here. The main point of this mission—getting the two men—was nearly wrapped up.

JUST A MINUTE . . .

Then came the fateful moment when I first heard about a “small problem”: “Hey, Struecker, we’ve got a casualty,” came Danny McKnight’s voice through the radio. “You need to go get him, put him on your vehicle, and take him back to base.”

I got out and walked back to his Humvee. “Sir, what’s up?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know who it is, but his condition doesn’t sound too good. You need to get him out of here. I’ll give you one of the cargo Humvees [the military version of a pickup truck], and your two with your squad can escort him back to the airfield.”

“Who are we talking about, sir? And where is he?”

“I don’t know the name, but he’s one of the guys in Sergeant Eversmann’s chalk just up ahead. You can ask Captain Steele if you want—he’s right by the target building.”

Steele was our overall Ranger company commander, a big man who had played football at the University of Georgia. I walked in his direction. The closer I got, the more the hostile fire seemed to increase. The Somalis weren’t hitting much of anything, as usual, but they were definitely turning up the volume. I had been shot at before, enough to tell by the sound when the rounds were getting

close. I crouched near a wall while I talked with Captain Steele to get a better fix on where to go.

The problem was this: as Eversmann's men had fast-roped down from their Black Hawk helicopter to secure the northwest corner of the perimeter, a young Ranger named Todd Blackburn had missed the rope as he jumped out. Either that, or he took a bullet into his bulletproof vest, which didn't penetrate but successfully stunned him right at the point of grabbing the rope. To make matters worse, the Black Hawk was higher than normal from the ground, due to some power lines on that corner (not that Mogadishu's electricity supply was even functioning anymore). Todd Blackburn had plunged some seventy feet and hit the street headfirst with a sickening thud.

I ran back to the convoy, grabbed a stretcher off the back of the cargo vehicle, and hollered for Moynihan to follow me. When we got to Eversmann's corner, I saw a medic working furiously on the guy in the street, trying to get his airway open. I moved to catch a glimpse of Blackburn's face, and it was not a pretty sight. Blood was coming from his nose, his mouth, and one of his ears. His eyes were rolled back into his head.

He still had his helmet on; nobody wanted to remove it for fear of jarring him. *He's hurt his back*, I thought. *We're going to have to be really careful moving him.*

We gingerly lifted Blackburn onto the stretcher, then hoisted it up and started back down the street. As we ran the enemy fire grew worse, to the point that we had to take shelter for a moment. *Man, these guys are coming from about every window and rooftop, aren't they?* I thought. I had hoped we could get this job done without rousing the whole militia.

In spite of the hammering, we fought our way back to the vehicles, where we loaded Blackburn on the back of the cargo Humvee. A medic quickly went to work on him, totally exposed to the incoming fire. A special operator jumped aboard to fire back and try to protect the medic and Todd.

After a quick consultation with Lieutenant Colonel McKnight to tell him I was leaving now with three vehicles, and to advise him on how the rest could find their way home without my map, we moved out. Turning right at the first corner, we headed for the next street to make another right back toward the ocean and out of the city. “We need to take it slow, so we don’t break Blackburn’s neck,” I instructed my guys. “Dodge every pothole you can.”

At the second corner, however, it was as if the whole city opened up on us. As we threaded our way through the narrow street with two- and three-story buildings on both sides, bullets were flying our way from every direction. We fought back with everything we had: our personal M-16s, submachine guns, Paulson’s .50 cal up on top. It was definitely intense.

Paulson was swinging back and forth, shooting all over. “Paulson, just take the left side!” I hollered. “Pilla, you cover the right!” I concentrated on fighting the danger ahead of us.

We had stormed our way through about five blocks when we reached National Street, a four-lane boulevard. A right turn here would head us out of the slums and back toward the base. We were just rounding the corner when Dom Pilla spotted a gunman leveling his AK-47 right at him. Dom fired at the guy—who in the very same instant fired at Dom’s head. The two shots were virtually simultaneous. The next thing I knew, Moynihan was screaming in the back: “Pilla’s hit! He’s shot in the head!”

I whirled to look around the corner of the metal plate. Dom Pilla had slumped over into Tim Moynihan's lap—and there was blood everywhere. The whole back of the Humvee was bright red. I couldn't believe how much of an effect one bullet could have.

It had, in fact, entered just above Dom's left eye and proceeded to blow out the whole back of his head. Just an inch higher, and it would have clanged off Dom's helmet. But it had struck flesh and brain instead.

"What do we do? Dom's killed!" Moynihan yelled. At this my other two guys, Kerr and Paulson up on top, began freaking out as well. For a second I panicked on the inside. I had just lost a very good soldier, a man I was responsible for—and a good friend. I swallowed hard. This operation was going seriously askew.

THE GAUNTLET

I couldn't let myself think more about all that. I had to detach myself and jump back into tactical mode. Otherwise a horrible situation would get even worse. *Take charge, Jeff*, I told myself.

"Moynihan," I said in a steady voice, "stop what you're doing. Take your weapon and face right; pick up Dominick's sector of fire." He quieted down as he followed my order.

"Kerr, step on it!" I said to the driver. "Fly down this road as fast as you can." No more worrying about jostling Todd Blackburn's neck or back in the vehicle behind us. Better that than any more of us getting killed in this maelstrom of hot lead. We couldn't afford to poke along as fat, easy targets in the middle of a hostile city.

We roared down National Street for a good mile until we approached the big food distribution center. Twice a day in Mogadishu,

UNICEF, CARE, Food for the Hungry, and other agencies handed out relief, and every starving Somali showed up to get their next meal. Wouldn't you know—this just happened to be the hour of the evening handout. The road was packed with literally thousands of people. I couldn't even see to the far side of the crowd. Meanwhile, we were still getting hammered from the buildings on both sides.

“Paulson!” I hollered up to my gunner. “We've got to clear a path. Start shooting over their heads. Don't kill anybody, but make them think you're shooting at them, so they'll scatter.” To help get the crowd's attention, I threw half a dozen nonlethal grenades.

The sea of humanity at the distribution center started to part—slowly. “Hurry up, people!” my driver yelled. The hail of bullets continued.

Finally, I couldn't stall any longer. “Just floor it,” I told Kerr. “They'll get out of the way.” We plunged toward the crowd and eventually reached the far side of it.

On our way again and building speed, the hostile fire slacked off a bit. Instead of getting shot at from fifty places at once, it was down to five places at once. Just then the voice of Platoon Sergeant Bob Gallagher, my direct superior on this particular mission, came on the radio. “How are things goin'?”

I definitely did not want to answer that. Most of our unit had heard about Blackburn's fall by now, but almost nobody knew about Pilla. And bad news has a way of messing with soldiers' minds—even highly trained Rangers. I ignored the question.

Gallagher's voice came again. “How's it goin', Struecker?”

I couldn't stiff-arm him again. Finally I said, “I don't want to talk about it.”

That reply, of course, only piqued his interest.

“You got any casualties?”

“Yeah, one.” *Just let it go, man!* my mind was begging.

“Who is he, and what’s his status?”

I took a deep breath. “It’s Pilla,” I finally answered.

“What’s his status?”

Another breath. I was cornered; I had to answer the question.

“He’s dead.”

The radio, which had been crackling with lots of conversation all across the city between our various units, suddenly went quiet. Nobody said another word. Soldiers were simply stunned. This was the first man we’d lost since landing in Somalia. The invincible Ranger Regiment had been nicked by an untrained, impoverished Somali gunman with little more than a grudge to pursue.

I switched frequency on the radio and called the JOC back at the base. “Hey, I’m about two minutes out. Get the surgeons ready for us, okay? I’ve got one guy who got hurt on the fast rope, and another guy just got hit in the head—he may not have survived.” I was pretty sure he hadn’t, but then, I didn’t know for certain.

We were making good progress until we came upon a Toyota pickup truck doing no more than ten miles an hour. Somalis were hanging all over it, the way you often see in poor countries; some were just barely grasping a piece of metal to gain a footing.

“Lay on the horn!” I yelled at my driver. He did so—with no response. The truck just kept poking along.

We were still getting shot at from shadowy silhouettes. “Okay, run him off the road!” I ordered Kerr. “We gotta get our guy back to a doctor before anybody else gets blasted.”

Kerr looked at me as if I were crazy, but then proceeded to move up and bump the back end of the Toyota. The truck swerved,

banged into something on the side of the road, and swung back into the lane again.

“Hit him again!” Kerr came up behind the truck, made contact, and kept pushing this time until the lane was finally cleared.

Soon after, we whipped through the gate into the airport compound, where a scene of frenzy confronted us. Guys were running everywhere, loading helicopters, loading vehicles, scrambling for more ammo. The medical team was waiting as I had requested. They began pulling Pilla out of the back of my Humvee. When I saw his face as white as a snow-bank, I didn’t have to wonder anymore.

“Just leave him alone,” I said to Doc Marsh. “He’s gone. Go to the other vehicle. Blackburn’s over there.” Medics began racing in that direction.

INTERMISSION

There was nothing more for me to do. I walked away from my vehicle as a wave of fury swept over me. It had been the worst, most intense forty minutes of my life. What a stupid situation. The mission had been going so well—until this. We had lost one of the best guys ever to wear the Ranger scroll on his uniform, and another one was in serious jeopardy. This whole thing was disgusting.

I took off my helmet in frustration and whipped it like a Frisbee across the airfield. It bounced along and clattered to a stop against a stack of sandbags. I wanted to scream in anger. This was so, so wrong.

God, like, so what’s the deal here? I vented. How come this all fell apart on me? What am I supposed to do next?

I received my answer to the last question when I turned around

and looked into the faces of my squad. Their eyes were huge. They had never seen me, their leader, show emotion. Had I lost my grip?

I picked up my helmet and placed it under my arm as I walked back in their direction. Doctors and medics were still running back and forth. One came around the corner with a wooden backboard for transporting Todd Blackburn. I moved past them to face my men again.

An awkward moment passed. I realized they were waiting for me to speak. I searched for words to explain all the bullets and blood we'd just been through. I tried to think of how I could smooth over the hurt they were feeling. But I couldn't come up with anything. So I kept my mouth shut.

Just then the air was changed by the approach of Lieutenant Larry Moores, the officer in charge of my platoon. A man well into his thirties, he was older than most lieutenants and was known to be a meticulous planner. Yet he trusted us subordinates greatly, having been in our shoes as an enlisted man before he was commissioned. His face was drained; I knew immediately that something was very wrong.

"What's up, sir?" I asked.

Very slowly he answered, "Another Black Hawk has gone down. You need to get your squad ready to go back in. We need to get to the crash site."

"What do you mean, *another*?" I cried. "We're losing birds now?"

"Yes. Wolcott's went down while you were out, and now we just found out that Mike Durant's is down as well."

I was dumbfounded. *Oh, God, no*, I thought as he walked away. After all the disaster we'd just come through, we were being told to head right back into it again?

“Acknowledging the fact that a Ranger is a more elite soldier who arrives at the cutting edge of battle by land, sea, or air . . .” That’s what our creed says. “Readily will I display the intestinal fortitude required to fight on to the Ranger objective and complete the mission.” Now was the time to prove it.

“Sergeant Mitchell!” I called to my team leader. “Get your vehicle down to the supply point and get more ammo! Get some for us, too, while you’re at it. And don’t forget to fuel up.

“Moynihan! Thomas! Go get some water, and make sure there’s nothing in the vehicles that’s not absolutely mission-essential! Get some night-vision goggles, too. This might take awhile.” They stared at me for just a moment and then did as they had been told.

DEATH UP CLOSE

I was just about to pass out more orders to the remaining squad members when Sergeant John Macejunas, one of the special operators, walked over. A former Ranger with blond hair and a deep tan, he was the epitome of fitness. Knowing what I’d been told to do, he offered a bit of free advice.

“Sergeant, you don’t want to take your men back out in all that blood. You need to clean up your vehicle first.”

I turned to look at the mess in the back of my Humvee. He was right. If we headed back into battle with Pilla’s blood splattered all over the place, it would definitely psych out my guys. I should have realized that on my own.

“Roger that,” I replied to Macejunas.

I looked at Kerr and Paulson, the last two guys without a job to do. Neither of them was more than about nineteen years old. I could

see in their eyes that they were already overwhelmed. How could I order them to clean up the blood of a man they so respected? I should do this myself. I'd already carted away several body bags in my military life. I'd had my hands in blood more than once. If I asked some young guy to do this, would I be ruining him for life?

Finally I said, "Men, I could use some help cleaning up this vehicle—but I'm not going to make you do it. If you want to volunteer, okay. But if you'd rather not, I understand. Just go help load up more fuel and ammo instead."

The two privates first class didn't walk away. They stayed with me as we pulled the Humvee over to the tanker, parking it to slope downhill so water would drain out the back of it. Mogadishu had no running water; this would strictly be a bucket operation. We got a big sponge, a little yellow brush, and started sloshing water over the metal.

It was an awful mess. We scrubbed away for probably five minutes. I looked at my hands and saw the scratches from thrusting the barrel of my rifle out the Humvee window. I knew I should probably be wearing surgical gloves, but I didn't want to bother running to the other side of the hangar to get some. So I just plunged my hands into the gore and tried not to think about it. We doused the vehicle with bucket after bucket of water, until finally the grim evidence of death sank away into the desert sand.

I picked up the ammo can that Pilla had been using. It was perhaps two-thirds full of his blood, with unused bullets swimming in it. *Man, we're gonna need this*, I told myself as I ran the belt of ammunition through a bucket of clean water. We'd probably be using every bullet we could gather.

As we worked, the radio in front kept transmitting the sounds of the worsening battle in the city. It seemed that dozens of voices were

talking on top of each other—and what struck me was not just the fact of guys getting pinned down and shot at, but even more, the rising urgency in their tone. Everybody sounded like he was yelling at somebody a thousand miles away. Calls for medevacs, pleas for reinforcement—you could sense the wave of fear starting to sweep across the battlefield. The situation was growing worse by the minute.

I hung on every word. With each new voice, I pictured in my mind the face of the speaker. It was becoming clear that we weren't just battling a thousand or so militia fighters in the streets of Mogadishu; we could have handled that many. This was sounding more like ten thousand. There seemed to be no end to their resources.

Occasionally my heart would soar as a commander gave confident directions to his soldiers on the radio. Then just as soon, my spirit would sink as another frazzled sergeant said, "We're getting clobbered here; we really need some help." I knew the sensation all too well.

Finally I said to Kerr, "Turn the radio off. I don't even want to hear what's happening for a while." We didn't have time to be distracted anyway; we needed to get ready to move out again.

The relative silence allowed new thoughts to surface in my mind. *I'm going to die tonight. And what's just as bad, I'm going to get every one of my men killed. I just know it. There's no way we can survive another run back into that city. Tomorrow this squad is going to have ten dead Rangers instead of just one.*

My mind wandered to my wife, Dawn, newly pregnant. *My child is never going to know his daddy, I thought. This is it, tonight. How is she going to manage having a baby and raising it all by herself?*

I started to pray. It was a very simple prayer. *God, I'm in deep trouble, as you can see. I need help. I'm not saying you should get me out of this. I just need your help.*

Still scrubbing away at the blood, my attention veered off somehow to an ancient scene: Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. I was no longer in Somalia at that moment. I was echoing the prayer of Jesus: “My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine” (Matthew 26:39).

My life was in God’s hands, I told myself, and the only thing I could do at this critical point was to trust him with the course of events. The hour and circumstances of my death were up to him. I could definitely die tonight. Of course, I could get killed crossing the street back in America, too. I could slip on a bar of soap in the shower and hit my head.

If I survived this night, I eventually would get to go home to Dawn and our new baby. If I died, I’d go home to be with Jesus in heaven. Either way, I’d be a winner. So maybe I needed to stop being afraid of the upcoming battle after all.

A second realization then came my way. I had a leadership role to fulfill. *God, please don’t let me do anything stupid that puts the rest of my men into a slaughter tonight, I prayed. If any of them get killed, I sure don’t want it to be my fault.*

The sense of peace I felt was almost surreal. I snapped back out of my reverie, took a visual inspection of the vehicle, and said, “Men, we’re good. Let’s load up and get ready to move.” We returned to the rest of the squad, where Danny Mitchell had the preparations in good order.

I could tell that one of my slightly older men, Brad Thomas, was definitely struggling. He had been married just a few months before coming here. Now I was asking him to head straight back into the teeth of destruction. He pulled me aside to say, “Sergeant, you know I *really* don’t want to go back out.”

THE ROAD TO UNAFRAID

This was a costly thing for a Ranger to say. He knew there would be consequences for shrinking from the fight. He had apparently weighed that price and decided to pay it.

Now what was I, his sergeant, going to do? I reviewed the options in my mind. *I could end his career in the Ranger Regiment right here by saying, “Go back to your cot and pack up your stuff—you’re on the next plane out of here!”*

I opted instead for a more nuanced approach. “Listen, I understand how you feel,” I said in a low tone. “I’m married, too. Don’t think of yourself as a coward. I know you’re scared. I’ve never been in a situation quite like this, either. But we’ve got to go. It’s our job. The difference between being a coward and a hero is not whether you’re scared or not. It’s what you do while you’re scared.”

I don’t know to this day where I got that line. It was nothing I had read in a book or heard from a speaker. I guess God just gave it to me when I needed it. I turned my attention back to the demands of the moment.

Brad Thomas walked away momentarily, thinking hard. I climbed into my Humvee and in a minute glanced at the rearview mirror. There I saw Brad climbing aboard with the rest of us. We were ready to roll in search of the downed Black Hawk that needed us.



The base of a flagpole where the U.S. flag flies over an undisclosed location in the Global War on Terrorism.