

INSIDE THE WORLD'S
DEADLIEST SNIPER
PROGRAM

THE KILLING SCHOOL

FORMER HEAD NAVY SEAL SNIPER INSTRUCTOR AND
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE RED CIRCLE*

BRANDON WEBB

WITH JOHN DAVID MANN

THE KILLING SCHOOL

ALSO BY BRANDON WEBB AND JOHN DAVID MANN

The Red Circle

The Making of a Navy SEAL

Among Heroes

Total Focus

Also by Brandon Webb

The Power of Thought



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Brandon Webb
with John David Mann

St. Martin's Press  New York

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www.stmartins.com

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-12993-2 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-12994-9 (e-book)

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First Edition: May 2017

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This book is dedicated to my fellow warriors turned military authors, who have had the courage, in the face of massive peer pressure, to enter the author's coliseum and engage in literary battle, and who emerge again, their faces "marred by dust and sweat and blood" (as Teddy Roosevelt puts it in the quote on pg vii), knowing they gave their all in the process.

It's ironic that these warriors, many of whom barely managed to survive being shot by the enemy's ranks, arrive back home in the States only to find themselves targeted and shot at in a war of words, often fired their way by members, or former members, of their own units.

Criticism by some in the military community is expected, especially from those who served in the Special Operations community, a group largely in the shadows prior to September 11, 2001. Still, scrutiny is one thing. Trash-talking and outright character assassination is something else. I've experienced this myself, and it's no fun. So have Chris Kyle, Marcus Luttrell, Howard Wasdin, and scores of other colleagues. So, no doubt, will the four men whose stories we share in these pages.

The next time you see one of those "silent professionals" disparaging someone from their own community, on social media or elsewhere, keep this in mind: most critics and would-be character assassins typically share two traits in common—insecurity with their own performance (in this case, with their own military service) and professional jealousy.

More than a century ago, an old cavalry soldier and Medal of Honor recipient, no stranger himself to the slings and arrows of envious resentment, put it far better than I can:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

—Teddy Roosevelt

Contents

Author's Note	xi
Maps	xii
Prologue: Living with Death	1

I. THE MISSION

1. Warrior, Assassin, Spy	7
2. Born to Shoot	22
3. Hell	38

II. THE CRAFT

4. Sniper School	69
5. The Platinum Standard	95
6. Zen Mind, Lethal Mind	117
7. The Reality of War	138
8. The Art and Science of the Shot	159

III. THE STALK

9. Welcome to the Jungle	181
10. Outside the Box	205
11. The Long Night	228

IV. THE SHOT

12. Ambush	253
13. Impact	273

14. Deliverance	300
------------------------	------------

V. THE KILL

15. Taking Life	321
------------------------	------------

Epilogue: Alive	336
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Afterword: A Spec Ops Sniper in Civilian Life	341
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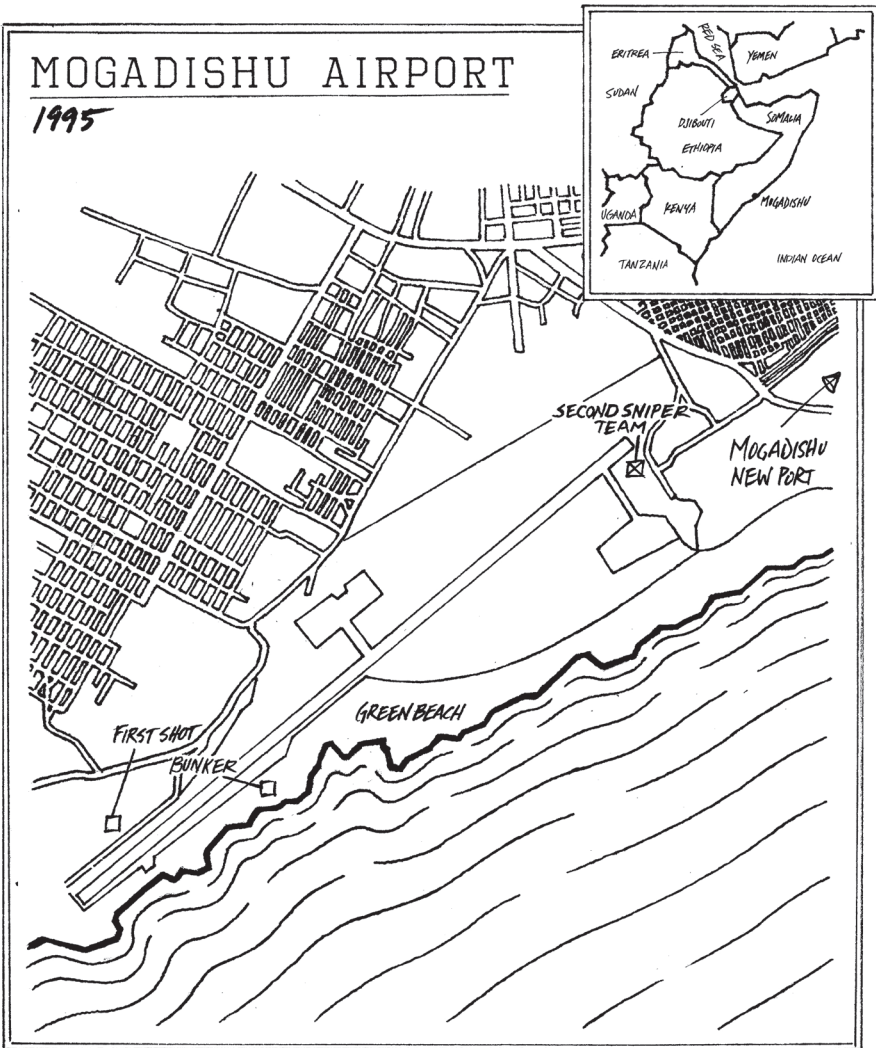
Acknowledgments	345
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Author's Note

All the events in this book are true and are described herein to the best of my knowledge and/or recollection. In several cases, names have been changed. We have at all times sought to avoid disclosing particular methods and other sensitive mission-related information. This book was submitted to, partially redacted, and ultimately cleared by the Department of Defense review board prior to publication.

MOGADISHU AIRPORT

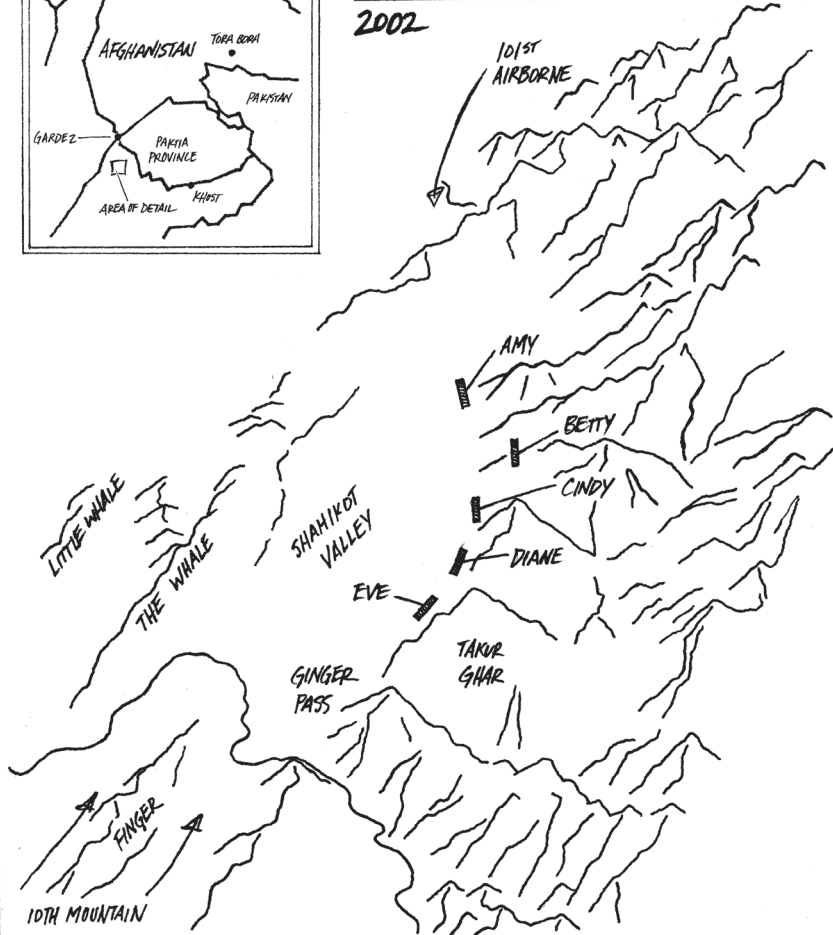
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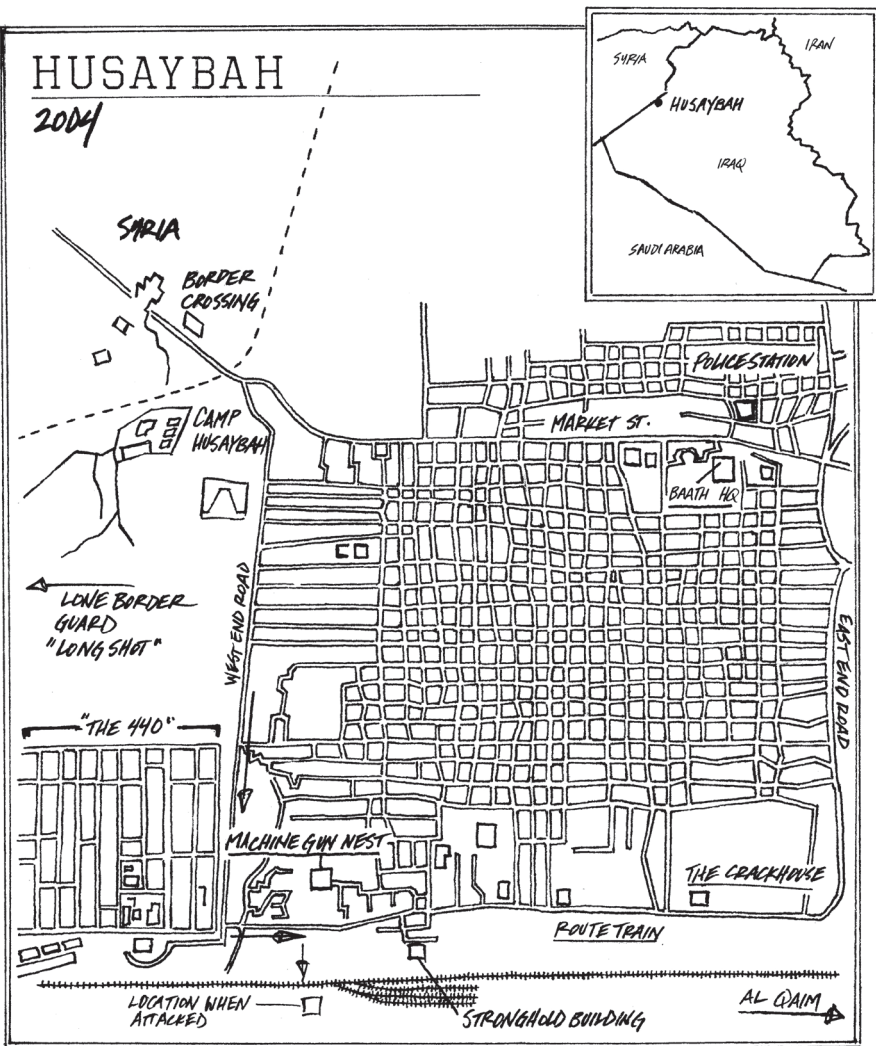
SHAHIKOT VALLEY

2002



HUSAYBAH

2004



HELMAND PROVINCE

2009

MAIN ROAD

THE CHECKEN
(± 500 YDS)

MACHINE GUN
- 3 GUYS -
@ 500 YDS

@ 1000 YDS

MOPED GUY

HOLE

VILLAGE @ 300 M
FIRST OBSERVE
ACTIVITY

IRVING, PEMBERTON
+ RECCE TEAM

INITIAL
APPROACH

800 METER DASH

2ND PLATOON

300 M

ALAMO

DITCH

TREE LINE

RAVINE

MAIN ELEMENT
FIREFIGHT

FINAL RUN TO
HUMVEES
(1 MILE)



PROLOGUE: LIVING WITH DEATH

Every man owes a death. There are no exceptions.

—Stephen King, *The Green Mile*

I have an unusual relationship with death.

For most of us, death is a mystery, a thing we fear and seek to avoid, evade, or deny, even to the point of pretending it doesn't exist, at least until we reach our sixties or seventies and it starts coming around to claim the lives of those we know and love.

For me, the face of death is as familiar as the barista at my local coffee shop.

In the freezing morning hours of March 4, 2002, I sit with seven of my teammates in an MH-47 Chinook helicopter, code name Razor 1. We're not moving; we're tied down at Bagram Air Base in northern Afghanistan, waiting for the word to go. We have been deployed as a QRF (quick reaction force) to fly out to the Shahikot Valley, near the Pakistan border about a hundred miles south of here, to rescue Neil Roberts, a fellow Navy SEAL who has been shot down on a mountaintop there, along with a team of SEALs who went in to get him out and got pinned down themselves by enemy fire.

Finally the word comes—only it isn't "GO," it's "Get Off."

At the last minute, for reasons we are never told (no doubt political), we are yanked off the bird and replaced by a team of U.S. Army Rangers who fly off in our place while we sit on our hands. Five members of that rescue team—the team that replaced us, the team that should have been us—never come back. Neither does Roberts. Instead, he becomes the first U.S. Navy SEAL killed in the young conflict people are already calling the War on Terror.

A few weeks later, another SEAL named Matthew Bourgeois steps out

of a Humvee on the outskirts of Kandahar and onto a land mine. The bizarre thing is, I stood there, on that exact same spot, two months ago, when the Humvee I was riding in parked right there—directly on top of a live antitank land mine. The only reason the damn thing didn't blow us to pieces is that whoever set it up did a lousy job.

But not this time. Unlike the one underneath my Humvee's wheel, the device Matthew just stepped on has been set correctly. A fraction of a second later he becomes Afghanistan's Navy SEAL casualty #2.

You could say I had cheated death once again, but I didn't see it that way. Orpheus may have tricked Hades; Ingmar Bergman may have had Max von Sydow play chess with Death; but those are only stories. In real life, death isn't something you cheat or outmaneuver. Death is like the wind: it blows where it wants to blow. You can't argue with death; you can't stop it. Best you can do, as any sailor will tell you, is your damndest to harness it.

We never really left Afghanistan, and soon we were in Iraq, too, and many other parts of the world, and more deaths followed. In 2012 I started writing a book, *Among Heroes*, honoring friends of mine who had given their lives in the course of the War on Terror. While I was still working on the first draft, my best friend in the world, Glen Doherty, was killed in Benghazi. Before the manuscript was finished, another SEAL sniper friend, Chris Kyle, died in Texas while trying to help out a suffering vet. I had thought the book was my idea; but death was writing it with me.

As many thinkers over the ages have pointed out, your relationship with death colors your relationship with life, perhaps even determines it. Crazy Horse rode into battle at the Little Bighorn saying, "Today is a good day to die." That's not simply a declaration of balls and bravery. Embracing death is the only thing that allows you to fully embrace being alive. "The fear of death follows from the fear of life," said Mark Twain. "A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time."

As I said, I have an unusual relationship with death, but then, so does every Special Operations sniper.

The sniper plays many roles in modern warfare. He or she is a master of observation and reconnaissance, often the commander's prime instrument of detailed intelligence behind enemy lines. Snipers are master trackers, often devoting hours or days to following a trail and observing people's movements without ever firing a single shot. They serve as assets of psychological warfare; a single sniper can sow confu-

sion and insecurity in the minds of thousands of enemy troops. Advanced military sniper training, probably the most exacting and excruciating of any course of training anywhere on earth, schools its students in an astonishing range of skills and disciplines, from digital photography and satellite communications to physics to memorization techniques that any Las Vegas huckster would kill to own.

Still, while these are all real and true aspects of what is one of the world's most complex skill sets, the fact remains that the sniper's fundamental task is brutally simple. It is the sniper's job to compose, choreograph, and execute a death.

The experience of killing, of course, is hardly unique to snipers. That is the nature of war; every soldier, sailor, and airman is put in a position to come face-to-face with death, and many do. A line of tanks, a formation of aircraft, a company of infantry: these are all tasked with delivering death—but in a messier, more haphazard, and more massive way. They pour out huge amounts of money and matériel onto the battlefield, slaughtering dozens or hundreds, destroying buildings and towns, despoiling environments.

The sniper's charge is to dole out death to an individual, singularly and instantaneously.

The killing that a sniper delivers is different from that of the rest of war. For one thing, it is vastly more precise, more efficient, and, to be frank, more economical. In Vietnam, killing a single NVA or Vietcong took American infantry firing roughly fifty thousand rounds, at the cost of well over \$2,000. For an American sniper to dispatch one enemy fighter took an average of 1.3 rounds. Total cost: 27 cents.

The sniper's kill is also more personal. It's one thing to charge onto a battlefield in the heat of a firefight, or hurl a grenade over a wall, even shoot someone with a sidearm as you run through a building, adrenaline soaking your muscle fibers and nerve endings. But when you sit concealed in a hide site for hours, even days, watching someone, noting his every move, getting to know his daily routine, his mannerisms, assembling an entire profile of his personality and intentions through exhaustive observation, it's an entirely different experience. A sniper may know his target intimately before the moment comes to squeeze the trigger.

Finally, the way a sniper kills another human being is vastly more deliberate. More conscious. "More cold-blooded," you could say—but if you do, then you've never walked in a sniper's shoes. Chris Kyle, arguably the most famous of twenty-first-century snipers, was often asked about how he felt about all the people he'd killed, and Chris always

turned it around: it wasn't about the people he killed, it was about the boys he kept from being killed. Most military snipers you talk to will say the same thing. Their goal out there in the field isn't to take lives so much as it is to save them.

But make no mistake: while preservation of life may be the goal, inflicting death is the means. The sniper, possibly more than any other military figure, embodies the inherent contradictions and ironies of war. The aim of war is to squelch or settle conflict; in other words, to enable the people whom the warrior represents to live in peace. When you go to war, your ultimate purpose is to remove barriers that keep societies from going about their normal lives; to promote the peace, to protect and preserve the living.

Which you do by killing.

The sniper's mission is to deliver life by delivering death.

This is the story of the people who do that: who they are, how they do what they do, and the training that produces them.

I.

THE MISSION

You will be inserting in one of the most lethal trouble spots on the face of the planet. You will have been briefed beforehand, to the best of our ability and extent of current intel, but the unknowns will greatly outweigh the knowns.

You will be the eyes and ears, the radar and periscope, of our operation. You will encounter situations where you are the only one who actually knows the full extent of what is going on there on the ground, and will have to make judgment calls about how to respond, even if you do not always have the explicit authority to do so.

To an extent greater than in any previous era of warfare, the course this conflict takes, and the odds for its successful completion, will depend on you. . . .

1

WARRIOR, ASSASSIN, SPY

There is another type of warfare—new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.

—President John F. Kennedy

*A few miles off the coast of Somalia
Monday, February 27, 1995, close to midnight*

I've never drowned to death, but I've come close. I'm not saying we were exactly waterboarded during the course of our training, but let's put it this way: I'm familiar with how it feels to be surrounded, invaded, swallowed by water, that intimate sense of skin-close death. I'd already known it for years. At the age of thirteen, I would dive deep down in the middle of the night, into the inky green blackness, to wrestle free a tangled anchor attached to the boat where I worked. There's something primal about being taken over by water, something deeply peaceful even as it terrifies you. "Ashes to ashes," goes the familiar funeral patter, "dust to dust . . ."—but it's not really like that. Dust isn't where we started. We came from water, and the water is always ready to claim us back.

Right now Alex Morrison was mulling over thoughts about death and water, as he felt their craft heave and plunge in the midnight African sea swell.

Alex had been a SEAL since 1989, graduating from the Naval Special Warfare sniper program in mid-'94, less than a year earlier. The son of

a marine officer, he had joined the teams out of an unquenchable thirst for adventure. He had the feeling he was about to get some.

He looked around, craning his eyes in the dark.

There were about forty of them, crammed onto their bench seats in the dark, packed like heavily armed sardines into a corrugated steel MILVAN shipping container fastened to the deck of an amphibious hovercraft, speeding toward the Somali coast, a few miles still to go. They couldn't see out, not that there was much to see at midnight on the ocean; still, if they were out on deck at least they would have been able to see the stars and get a sense of horizon. If something happened, they would have been able to *do* something.

No dice. All they could do was think about the mission in front of them.

"Operation Restore Hope," that's what they'd called it back in 1992 when it started. An international effort to bring order and stability to war-torn, famine-ravaged Somalia. All you had to do was look at the Battle of Mogadishu in October 1993 to know how *that* plan was turning out.

More like Operation Hopeless, thought Alex.

And now that they'd pulled the plug, someone had to go in and get the last few thousand U.N. personnel who were still there, housed in complexes in and around the coastal airport. They couldn't be airlifted out—too many crazy, khat-chewing Somali militia running around with surface-to-air missiles. They couldn't leave via commercial shipping, either: too many mortars, RPGs, and so on. It had to be a military operation, and a delicate one at that. Which was why Alex and his platoon were there.

The operation employed a total of about fourteen thousand personnel, though only a fraction of those were being used in the actual landing force. Most would remain onboard the Coalition fleet of two dozen ships, four miles off the coast, to receive the evacuees and support the mission. It would be the largest amphibious withdrawal under hostile conditions since we'd pulled out of North Korea in 1950.

About half the landing forces would put in at Mogadishu's seaport, just north of the airport, in large landing craft. Hundreds more would roll in on amphibious assault vehicles, essentially large waterproofed tanks. Some were flying in on helos. Not Alex. He and the other sardines were hovercrafting straight onto the beach by the airport runway, where he and their platoon's other sniper would immediately fan out with their support teams and establish overwatch for the duration

of the mission. Which should go smoothly—not a shot fired. After all, Mohamed Aidid and the other Somali warlords had been talked with, and had agreed to let the U.N. forces go peacefully. But of course, they had added, they couldn't be responsible for the actions of militias or splinter groups, now could they?

To put it in plain English: once the evacuation began, all bets were off.

Somewhere over eastern Afghanistan
Monday, March 4, 2002, before dawn

Rob Furlong crouched in the freezing cold transport helo, feeling the Chinook's metal hull vibrating against his back. Random thoughts slipped through his head. The smell of jet fuel and rush of frigid air acted like smelling salts, jarring his brain. As if he needed any added stimulation to stay alert. Hydraulic fluid wept down the interior walls of the bird here and there, creating the appearance of a dank cave. Sitting in their retractable pipe-and-webbing red nylon seats, two rows of fighters faced each other across the metal floor. The insistent, high-pitched whine of the Chinook's turbines and *whump whump whump* of its twin rotors made conversation close to impossible, leaving the men largely alone in their thoughts.

Sitting up toward the front of the chopper, near the door gunner, Rob looked to his left, down the row of assorted fighters on his side of the helo, and occupied his mind with trying to work out exactly which units they each belonged to—Delta, 101st Airborne, Tenth Mountain Division? There were about thirty of them, plus an all-terrain four-wheeler loaded by the rear ramp. Seven other Chinooks were flying in the same formation with his, with a total of more than two hundred troops, part of the nearly two thousand being thrown into this operation, the first major offensive of the still new war.

Most of these guys (Rob included) had never seen combat before. This was true of more than 95 percent of U.S. and Canadian armed forces. The world had been at peace, relatively speaking, for a decade.

Rob swiveled his head and looked the other way, toward the front of the craft, where the door gunner sat by his FN MAG M240 machine gun, doing a decent impression of a catnap. MAG: *mitrailleuse d'appui général*, French for "general purpose." The M240 fires 650 to 1,000 rounds per minute. Rob's mathematical mind automatically ran the

quick calculation. Once that gunner pulled the trigger, the big gun would be shooting ten to fifteen rounds every second. Not bad, for general purposes.

Those rounds were 7.62s. Unlike the “.50” of the .50 cal rounds Rob carried, which describes the bullet’s diameter (or, more accurately, the diameter of the gun barrel that fires it) in inches, the “7.62” denotes diameter in millimeters. A .45, a .38, a .22, those are inch-based calibers, the classic American naming style for firearms and ammunition. The popular 9mm (like the sidearm Rob carried) follows the European metric convention, as did the 5.56 shells that went with Rob’s combat rifle, the C8, and its close cousin, the American military workhorse M4, and the ever-popular M16, the standard U.S. service rifle since Vietnam.

Before boarding the chopper, Rob had talked with a young Delta sniper who carried an SR-25. Rob liked that gun. A semiautomatic, the SR-25 is built like an M16 only with a longer barrel, and rather than a 5.56 it shoots a 7.62, which packs that much more punch.

And then there was the massive .50 cal sniper rifle resting its stock on the helo’s floor next to Rob’s left foot. The .50 cal he would use to make history. Standing on its end, the long gun stood nearly as high as Rob himself, each rocket-ship-like bullet tall as a Coke can. A round from a .50 cal can reach out and touch someone at distances of more than a mile, and do so with a force that can take out an engine block. It is, as Rob puts it, “like a punch in the face from God.”

“*Ten minutes out!*” came the call back into the cabin.

Furlong looked over at the front gunner’s pintle-mounted M240 again, and wondered what it would sound like when that big gun exploded into action.

Husaybah, Iraq

Saturday, April 17, 2004, early morning

When Jason Delgado woke up in his bank office on the morning of April 17, his first thought was, *Shit*. He did not have a good feeling about the day ahead. Jason was not a banker, and this was no ordinary bank. He was the chief scout of his marine scout sniper platoon, and the sprawl of deserted offices and warehouses stuck on the ass-crack known as the Iraq-Syrian border were what he and his team had been calling home for a few months now.

He sat up on his cot, swiveled around to plant his feet on the floor, and looked around to find the source of the gunfire that had roused him.

Through the open door he saw the other two snipers in his section, Josh Mavica and Brandon DelFiorentino, sitting on their bunk beds, shooting people.

On their Xboxes. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*.

Boys will be boys. Delgado shook his head. "You guys don't get enough of that shit in your day job?" He nodded in the direction of the city that lay outside the walls of their base camp. Although barely six months their senior, Delgado felt something like a father's responsibility for these two, and for all the other guys in the platoon, too. Not yet twenty-three himself, Delgado was platoon sergeant of the sniper platoon for Lima Company, Third Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment, in charge of managing the fragile state of this misbegotten city.

It was barely two years since Rob Furlong's predawn helicopter ride into eastern Afghanistan, but the world was now a vastly different place. A year earlier, in March 2003, Delgado had been part of the unit that pushed north through Iraq to take Baghdad away from Saddam Hussein and give it back to the people. Now he was back in country on a new deployment, this time to the Wild West border town of Husaybah, his base of operations a literal stone's throw from Syria.

Husaybah. A three-syllable word meaning roughly "I can't believe the shit we're in." The drug-smuggling, arms-running, corruption capital of western Iraq, Husaybah made Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* look like a girls' finishing school.

Delgado reached down and grabbed his M40A3. Not quite the monster of Furlong's .50, but still a serious boom stick. The bolt-action M40 fires a .30-06 cartridge, the *thirty-aught-six* referring to both its caliber (.30) and the year it was adopted by the U.S. military (1906). The bolt action meant it wouldn't provide the rapid-fire performance of a semi-auto, like the M16 or the SR-25, but it delivered a hell of a wallop, and with phenomenal accuracy.

He headed to the porta-john, taking the gun with him. You never knew just when some upright citizen would fire a mortar shell over the wall.

Delgado was frustrated and pissed off. Worse, he was worried. For more than six weeks he'd been saying there was trouble brewing out in the streets, not just normal everyday urban-shithole trouble but the serious kind. Nobody seemed to believe him or see what he was seeing. Just a few days earlier one of his snipers had been shot through both legs. Another marine had died; yet another was back in the States in a coma, and probably wouldn't make it. To Jason, this did not feel like a series of unfortunate events. These were not random attacks.

Delgado grew up in the streets. He knew what it smelled like when something bad was about to go down. He was smelling it right now.

Somewhere in Helmand Province, Afghanistan
Thursday, July 9, 2009, midday

Nick Irving stood up, stretched, and yawned. He looked down at where he'd been sleeping: a spit of desert scrub with a small rock serving as his pillow. Not exactly the Hilton. Still, it was sleep. How long had he been out? He glanced at his watch. More than two hours. Amazing. In the past four days Nick had barely slept at all—a few stolen minutes here and there, a total of no more than three of the last ninety hours.

He bent down and picked up Dirty Diana off the blanket where he had carefully laid her. His beloved SR-25, named, of course, for the Michael Jackson song (released in 1988 when Irving was not yet two). A close cousin to the workhorse M4, the SR-25 was a smaller gun than Delgado's M40. Nick liked it for that reason: it was smaller and lighter, like himself, and he also liked it for its semiautomatic action, which suited the kind of intense, rapid-fire action he'd seen over five deployments as a U.S. Army Ranger in Iraq and Afghanistan. No long slow stalks or one-shot/one-kill Vietnam-style missions for Irving. At least not so far. No, the shit he'd seen had been more like the classic close-quarters-battle (CQB), full-contact, down-and-dirty fighting they'd practiced for days on end in ranger training than what you'd think of as a *sniper* mission per se.

The rangers are a relatively small Spec Ops outfit, numerically speaking, and tend to have an unusually high op tempo. In Iraq Nick's unit had routinely gone out on two missions per night, and sometimes as many as four or five. They'd go hit their target, be on their way back to rest and get some chow, and there'd be the commander on the radio saying they'd just gotten fresh intel on a new target, and they were back out again.

Back in the nineties, rangers served more or less in a supporting role, as in the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, when the Third Ranger Battalion (Nick's unit) supported the Delta Force fighters. In the new century's asymmetrical warfare that quickly changed, with ranger units working independently, gathering their own intel and mounting their own missions, doing their own high-value target (HVT) hits. Being a ranger sniper had become something like being a sniper on a SWAT team. Fast, hard strikes at short distances, always moving. No

sitting out there in a ghillie suit, looking for a target for a week, pissing in your pants while you lay in wait. Nick kept Dirty Diana dialed in at three hundred meters, a relatively short range for a sniper, and he'd taken plenty of shots shorter than that.

He strolled over to where a knot of marines were sitting playing poker. Irving and his spotter, Mike Pemberton, were the only two rangers here, temporary guests at a marine outpost somewhere out in the middle of the nowhere known as Helmand Province.

Jutting up from the middle of Afghanistan's southern border, Helmand was a very different part of the country from the area Rob Furlong had seen seven years earlier, in 2002, when the war was still fresh. No mountains to speak of here, just low-lying scrub, desert, and urban terrain. And poppies. Billions of poppies. Helmand Province had the largest concentration of poppy cultivation anywhere in the world. It was, in other words, heroin central, which meant it was also Taliban central and, increasingly, a safe haven for foreign radical Islamist forces.

American military presence here had been, up to this point, fairly close to zero.

"Hey, we heard where you guys are headed," one of the marines said. "That's some far-flung shit out there."

It was. Irving and Pemberton were headed deep behind enemy lines, into an area even marines wouldn't go without a full complement of forces, as Nick would soon learn.

"Watch out for the Chechen," said a second marine.

The Chechen? wondered Nick. *Who the hell is the Chechen?*

Somalia 1995. Afghanistan 2002. Iraq 2004. Afghanistan 2009.

Four plot points on a graph of America at war. That decade and a half has redefined the nature of the modern sniper, and Spec Ops snipers like Alex Morrison, Rob Furlong, Jason Delgado, and Nick Irving have played defining roles in each of these pivot points.

While Alex sat in the dark, heading for his rendezvous with the Mogadishu coastline, I was stationed in San Diego, working as a rescue swimmer on an antisubmarine helicopter squadron, still two and a half years away from entering BUD/S (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training). The idea of being a sniper was the furthest thing from my mind. When Rob Furlong boarded his Chinook to fly into combat in Afghanistan seven years later, I was there, too, just miles away, now serving as a sniper for SEAL Team Three, Echo Platoon, waiting to hear if we would be sent in after Neil Roberts and the others. By the time

Jason Delgado was waking up on April 17, 2004, in Husaybah, my BUD/S classmate Eric Davis and I were back in the States, implementing a stem-to-stern renovation of the Naval Special Warfare (SEAL) sniper course, where I would serve as course master for a few years. And when Nick Irving went deep into Taliban territory in Helmand Province in 2009, I was in the private sector, writing a book about snipers and beginning a career as an analyst and media commentator on military and foreign affairs. Whether from the inside looking out or the outside looking in, for a decade and a half the world of the Special Operations sniper has been my home, my study, and my fascination.

And it is one fascinating world.

Say the word “sniper” and chances are you think of a shadowy figure, so deeply camouflaged he escapes all detection, hiding out for hours or even days on end, waiting for the moment to strike like a snake, delivering the single fatal shot at extreme distances. You might think of Carlos Hathcock, the legendary marine sniper, the one the Vietcong dubbed *Lông Trắng*: the White Feather, for the feather he wore in his cap. Hathcock famously took three full days to cover a thousand yards before dispatching a Vietnamese general through the heart with a single shot. In 1967 Hathcock set what remained for decades the world record for longest kill shot, delivering death to his target at 2,500 yards.

Or you might think of Vasily Grigoryevich Zaitsev, the Russian shepherd boy turned sniper, made famous (as played by Jude Law) in the film *Enemy at the Gates*, who racked up more than two hundred kills in the defense of Stalingrad in 1942. Or Billy Sing, the celebrated Chinese-Australian sniper, credited with more than two hundred kills (and many suspect it's closer to three hundred), who in the 1915 Battle of Gallipoli put a bullet between the eyes of the Turkish sniper Abdul the Terrible at the same moment the other sniper was also targeting him.

Sometimes, a sniper's mission is exactly like that. But not very often.

That classic Vietnam-era picture is a view of the sniper as the ace of spades. In the reality of twenty-first-century combat, a Spec Ops sniper is more often called upon to serve as the whole deck of cards.

There is a reason for the mystique and fascination that surrounds the military sniper. Sniping is a concrete set of specific skills and training, yet at the same time it is also something more. Elite sniper training aims to develop in this warfighter a set of capabilities that is as close to omniscience and omnipotence as a human being can get. A combat sniper must have an exceptional grasp of every aspect of the field of war, from the overall tactical picture to the finest detail, and be able to func-

tion in effect as an entire military operation rolled into a single individual: an army of one.

The modern sniper needs to be a master of close quarters combat, close-range raids, kill/capture, and overwatch/protection of assault teams. He or she must of course also have a complete grasp of long-range marksmanship skills and all that entails. And finally there's the high-risk reconnaissance and surveillance toolbox, because a sniper is first and foremost an intelligence asset. Many of the sniper's most important missions will happen behind enemy lines and without ever firing a shot—though when called upon to do so, he (or she) must be 100 percent prepared, on an instant's notice, to fire that shot and do so with superhuman accuracy, whether at a distance of more than a mile or less than a hundred yards. And mere competence is as good (or rather, as bad) as useless here. The modern sniper needs to possess absolute mastery of all three broad skill sets: advanced assaulter, infallible marksman, and recon operator.

Warrior, assassin, spy.

Over the days and weeks ahead Morrison, Furlong, Delgado, and Irving would play all these roles, sometimes shifting from one to another in a span of minutes. Sometimes in a matter of seconds.

The Somali coast, February 27, 1995

Alex Morrison ate up the minutes by thinking through a range of potential scenarios he might face in the next few days.

He was packing a McMillan M88 .50 cal sniper rifle, a precursor of the big TAC-50 that Rob Furlong would carry into Afghanistan exactly seven years later. The M88, while not quite as large or heavy as the TAC-50, was damn close. Billed as accurate on targets up to two thousand yards, Alex's LRSW (long-range sniper weapon) was shooting a high-explosive Raufoss Mark 211 armor-piercing incendiary round with a muzzle velocity of close to three thousand feet per second.

This was the gun SEALs had used to disable Manuel Noriega's aircraft during the invasion of Panama. It was, in the words of another SEAL who had used it, "a beast."

At the same time, it was a bitch to operate. A single-shot weapon, it was the antithesis of the beautifully efficient semiauto mechanisms we would come to know and love (and rely on) in later years. With the M88, you had to haul out the bolt (that's pull *out*, not just *back*, as in, actually

remove it from the rifle), then put in a round, fit the bolt back into the gun and jack it, aim, shoot, then remove the bolt, knock out the spent brass, slip in a new round, and shoot. Not exactly rapid fire—and definitely not as fast as you need it to be when you're in a firefight.

Which shouldn't be a problem, though, right? According to their briefing, no major violence was expected. This was a peaceful withdrawal of troops. Their role was not to fight but to serve as a tactical show of force. A deterrent, in other words: to prevent violence, not to wage it.

Except that this was *Somalia*. The place was stark raving nuts. Alex and every other man sitting on those bench seats in the dark knew that anything could happen, and probably would. *Guess we'll find out soon enough*, he thought. *Meanwhile*. . .

Nothing drives a SEAL so crazy as being in a position where he cannot act. But for the moment, there wasn't much choice here. Sardines it was.

So they sat in the dark, rocking like bobblehead toys, plowing through the roughening sea state with visions in their heads of something going wrong and the whole goddamn hovercraft sinking, MILVAN and all. SEALs generally are not overly fussed by the prospect of their own imminent death, but Alex couldn't help thinking that drowning in a tin can off the coast of Somalia would be a decidedly UNSAT way to go.

Shahikot Valley, March 4, 2002

Anaconda. The op was named after one of the largest snakes in the world, one that kills its prey by wrapping it in its coils and squeezing it into submission. Which was the general plan here, in what would be the first large-scale offensive in the new war.

Americans had gone into Afghanistan directly after 9/11 to hunt down and kill or capture the masterminds who had perpetrated the attacks. At the same time, we were skittish about going in with too big a presence. We didn't want to do anything that would evoke memories of how the Soviet Union invaded and occupied this land of rocks and poppies in the eighties. At the height of its occupation the Soviet Bear had 120,000 troops on the ground here. We had so far dropped in barely a few hundred Spec Ops guys. We were being very cautious—as many would later point out, a little too cautious.

The attempt to round up Al Qaeda leaders and key Taliban figures at Tora Bora in December had been a dismal failure: the bad guys all

slipped through the noose. The solution: build a better noose, one with more armed muscle from the U.S. and its allies. That was Anaconda.

The plan went like this. One group, code name Hammer, would attack the Shahikot Valley, where it was believed some key leaders had gone into hiding, from the northwest, driving the enemy into the waiting arms of a second, larger group, code name Anvil, which would prevent their escape—the anaconda’s coils. Hammer was comprised mostly of Afghan troops, supported by U.S. Special Forces “advisors” and supplemented by airpower. Anvil, which would sweep in from the south and northeast and lie in wait in a semicircle ringing the southwestern escape routes, was made up of hundreds of conventional forces, mostly U.S. 101st Airborne and Tenth Mountain Division infantry, supplemented by Australian Special Air Service (SAS), Navy SEALs and Delta Force, unnamed special and covert operators . . . and six Canadian snipers.

Including one who was fresh out of sniper school.

A hunter from the Canadian outback, Furlong is a deceptively ordinary-looking guy. Five-eleven, average build, blond (though these days he wears his head shaved bald), pale blue eyes. Soft-spoken, chooses words with care and speaks in measured tones. Lying on the cool floor of that stillwater pond is a fighter who is as comfortably at home in a brawl as he is in front of a computer console. Not a guy likely to start a fight, perhaps, but sure as hell knows how to finish one. Five years earlier he’d held down a job punching computer keys. Now he was one of his country’s top military trigger-pullers.

The Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, or PPCLI, was about two thousand soldiers strong; Rob’s unit, the Third Battalion, was functionally the rough equivalent to the U.S. Army’s 75th Ranger Regiment, Nick Irving’s unit. The Patricias earned their motto “First in the field” by being the first Canadian unit deployed in 1914 in the Great War. Now, a century later, they were doing it again.

After the events of September 11, some nine hundred Canadian forces had deployed in support of the brand-new War on Terror. Of those nine hundred, just six would be handpicked to be part of the highly secret operation in the Shahikot Valley. On February 1, the ink barely dry on his sniper school certificate, Rob was in Edmonton, Alberta, buying a new home with his wife. The next day he was on a plane to Germany, destination Afghanistan.

“Five minutes out!”

When Rob and his five companions took off for Bagram on March 3,

they'd been the only ones on the big C-17. It was an eerie sight: the big ramp coming down, revealing that chasmic interior, and just the six of them walking up, like earthlings entering the spacecraft in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Other than pilot and crew, they were the only ones on the plane.

This was going to be a twenty-four-hour mission; at least, that's what their briefing had told them. Those responsible for planning Operation Anaconda didn't think there were more than a few hundred fighters in the valley (as it turned out, it was more like a few thousand), and did not expect much resistance (wrong again). Expectation was that within two days the insurgents would be negotiating their surrender, reflecting the view at the very top of the command food chain, which was that Afghanistan was by now pretty much a wrap.

As they reached the top of the C-17's ramp and its servomotor ground to life and began raising it again, a Canadian officer ran out onto the tarmac, his arms full of equipment. "Hey!" he shouted out as he ran toward the aircraft. "You guys! You gotta wear helmets!" He reached the plane and stood there, catching his breath. "And—here," he puffed as he held up the mass of gear. "You need—your flak vests."

Rob and the other snipers looked at each other, then back at the officer.

"Yeah," said one of them, "we don't wear that shit."

The ramp closed, leaving officer and gear standing on the tarmac.

Husaybah, April 17, 2004

Jason Delgado is about as opposite a personality from Rob Furlong as you could possibly invent. Five-nine, lean, a coiled spring with 1,000 volts running through it. He doesn't just talk, he shoots strings of profanity-laced Puerto-Rican-accented Bronx patter like a one-man machine gun team doing a turn onstage at the Improv. Listen closer, though, and you'll hear a fine-tuned intelligence behind the words.

Delgado started out in life with a hell of an inner-city Latino chip on his shoulder, but years of hard training in the U.S. Marine Corps obliterated it and honed his volatile temperament to an even-tempered razor edge. This is a guy who knows how to look at anything, anyone, any situation, see past the bullshit of appearances and into the heart of the matter. That mix of skills and temperament had gotten him to where he was, the leader of his platoon—and it was also what told him

that no matter what anyone else said, something evil was brewing in the streets of Husaybah.

Start in Husaybah and follow the Euphrates River as it meanders southeast. After some two hundred miles you'll come to a string of large cities: Ramadi, Fallujah, Baghdad. That was exactly the path taken throughout 2004 by a steady procession of contraband and war-making resources. Like drugs coming in through Miami and working their way up the East Coast to the streets of New York, fighters and weapons and ammo were pouring in over the border from Syria, through Husaybah, and flowing their way along the Euphrates and out to what would become the major flashpoints of the unfolding insurgency for years to come.

But we didn't realize this yet. When Jason Delgado took his M40 to the can to brush his teeth and start his day on April 17, 2004, it was barely a year since Saddam had fallen. The invasion was long over. We'd won. Hell, Delgado had been there in Baghdad's Firdos Square providing security when his commander, Bryan McCoy, threw a rope around Saddam's statue and pulled it down. He had seen with his own eyes the ecstatic citizens of Iraq screaming with joy, throwing the Americans flowers, bringing them baskets of food. It was like being an American GI at the liberation of Paris in 1945. *Ding dong, the dictator's dead*. Or if not quite dead, sure as hell ousted. Now it was just a matter of rebuilding infrastructure, winning hearts and minds, helping the country get back on its feet.

At least, that was the playbook. For close to two months now, Delgado and his boys had been playing border-town cop, trying to keep the peace while the U.S. government provided computers to the local schools and soccer balls for their soccer fields ("they were gonna hug all these people and kill 'em with rainbows," as Jason puts it), still under the impression that the "war" phase of the Iraq operation was well behind us, that our mission there now was purely one of aid and transition to a new civil society.

Delgado had a gut sense that impression was about to change.

Helmand Province, July 9, 2009

Nick Irving is a fairly short guy. "I used to be six foot two," he likes to say, "but jumping out of planes and doing fully loaded ruck marches compressed me down to five seven." As a teen he was so scrawny the

other kids dubbed him Stick Figure. But Nick exemplifies the concept of mind over matter. Through years of training he has built his body up to the point that he looks more like Mr. T than Steve Urkel. Mr. T with a well-used sniper rifle. You do not want to mess with this dude.

He is also one of the best shots I've ever seen. He has targets set up all over his house, and dry-fires at them constantly. This guy could shoot in the Olympics, that's how dedicated to the craft he is. The man is a born sniper.

Still, it had taken him years to get where he was now. During his first few deployments he had served in every role from door-kicker and Stryker driver to machine gunner and .50 cal gunner, before going through Ranger school and earning his ranger tab. It was only in the past year that he had finally gone through formal sniper training—months and months of it. Now, in his final deployment, he was the leader of his sniper unit, a warfighter come into his element.

The timing could not have been better, because the situation Nick dropped into in the spring of 2009 was a unique one, and uniquely demanded someone of his skills.

Earlier that year the White House had announced that it planned to send a surge of forces to Afghanistan, maybe as many as seventeen thousand American troops, because the situation there was deteriorating. By the end of that summer the number would exceed twenty thousand.

On July 2, just before dawn, more than four thousand marines poured into the northern portion of Helmand Province in an effort to clear insurgents from the area before the country's forthcoming presidential election. It was the largest offensive airlift of marines since Vietnam. Officially the op was called Operation Khanjar, or Strike of the Sword. In the way these things do, though, it soon acquired a catchier nickname.

"You're going to change the world this summer and it starts this morning," the commander of the Second Battalion, Eighth Marines Regiment told his men as they prepared to board helicopters. "The United States and the world are watching. Their expectations are enormously high during this *summer of decision*."

Summer of Decision it was.

According to the press, no Western troops had been in this area. As one captain was quoted, "We are kind of forging new ground here. We are going to a place nobody has been before." Dramatic—but not quite accurate. Nick and his fellow rangers had been there for months, taking out as many insurgents and high-value targets as possible, cleaning

house and paving the way for the marine sweep of the region. The same day that Operation Khanjar launched, Nick was recruited by a scruffy team of deep-reconnaissance operators to venture out into no-man's-land with them, deep in the province where few if any Westerners had dared to tread, and be their long gun.

Right now he was no more than thirty miles south of the marines' sweep. A half-hour drive, if you had decent roads. Which they didn't.

Nick didn't know anything about this larger strategic context. That was all above his pay grade, and in combat the generals don't tend to spell out the larger picture for the fighters on the ground. All Nick knew was that they were there to kill or capture as many bad guys as they could. And that had proven to be quite a few. He figured his unit had taken out close to a thousand enemy fighters during the months leading up to today. On one operation he and Pemberton had killed six Taliban commanders in a single night, effectively shutting down the Tali operation in Marjah for a week and a half.

Still, nothing he'd done had entirely prepared him for where he was right now.

He was about to get into the fight of his life.

Shahikot Valley, March 4, 2002

"Three minutes out!"

As the Chinook approached their preassigned drop point Rob Furlong heard the front gunner's M240 roar to life, its percussive GA-GA-GA-GA-GA-GA-GA-GA-GA shattering his thoughts. He had just enough time to wonder what the hell the guy was shooting at when he saw a stream of bright green tracers zipping up toward them and past the chopper's little porthole window.

He felt the aircraft veer sharply off to the right. They were taking fire.

They hadn't even reached their LZ yet and the mission was already going wrong.

The war was on.