

# **Jaeger: At War with Denmark's Elite Special Forces**

**Thomas Rathsack**

Also by Thomas Rathsack:

Shadow Army  
Black Dawn  
Handbook in High Performance

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## Preface

*Lose your dreams and you might lose your mind.*

Rock legend Mick Jagger's words may as well have been my own. From early childhood, running around in the woods playing soldier, through my late teenage years and early adult life as an infantryman in the Danish Royal Guards, the dream of entering the prestigious elite military unit, the Jaeger Corps, consumed my life.

From the age of 16, I trained intensively to fulfill that dream, and the reward came seven years later, after having served for five years as a sergeant in the Royal Guards. The thousands of hours I had put into my solo training had paid off; I had flown through the Corps' selection process and could finally put on the burgundy beret adorned with a brass emblem of a hunter's bugle. I will always remember the words of my course commander after another exhausting week on the selection course. Eight of the 94 applicants remained at the final evaluation, and he said: "Rathsack, it's too good to be true."

I do not write this because I view myself as a superior human being or to fuel the superman myths. I have plenty of weaknesses and negative impulses. But the dream of becoming a Jaeger motivated all the best aspects of my character. I had the privilege of having a clearly defined goal and was able to focus all my energy on reaching it. No static from everyday life, no disturbances, no worries. I lived in a black-and-white world consisting of eating, sleeping, and training. This gave me a mental focus that enabled me to reach my full potential.

The conventional and predictable life has never appealed to me. I have always had a desire to explore, experience, and discover—to feel alive. That's the key to life for me. I know I would be unhappy if I looked back on a life devoid of intensity and thrills. Thankfully, I have experienced the life I wanted as a soldier in the Jaeger Corps, as a Jaeger.

Initially though, my boyhood dream turned to disillusionment. I came to realize, after three decades of Cold War, the Jaeger Corps and the Danish military were simply not geared for operational service. It took me some time to acknowledge this, but once I had, I left the Corps to seek new challenges. In the following years, I traveled the world as a photographer in South America, became the head of NGO mine-clearing projects in the Caucasus region and Afghanistan, and even went through a short stint as a computer salesman.

Then, 9/11 happened. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and all Western civilization in 2001 prompted me to once again pull on the Jaeger Corps' uniform. I became a part of

the Jaeger Corps' deployment to Afghanistan as a member of the Task Group Ferret unit, a component of the international task force K-Bar, which was under the command of the US Special Forces. As an operator, I took part in search-and-destroy operations against Taliban and Al-Qaida in the harsh and dazzlingly beautiful mountains of Eastern Afghanistan. I also participated in unconventional warfare operations dressed as an Afghan, and later spent more than a year in Iraq participating in operations to target the infamous Jaysh al-Mahdi militia. I was also, for the first time in the Jaeger Corps' and indeed the Danish military's history, deployed as a bodyguard in a war zone.

With the words of another great rock legend—Bono from U2—I do not hold much respect for medals, but for scars. I have never been interested in medals, honors, or decorated uniforms, but there is one award I am proud to have received after participating in the Jaeger Corps' operations in Afghanistan in 2002: the Presidential Unit Citation Award. It is the highest honor bestowed on military units, and the President of the United States at the time, George W. Bush, personally awarded it to my commander, Lt. Col. Frank Lissner. As a soldier representing a small nation, I was enormously proud to be part of a unit that accomplished something extraordinary.

And Denmark is a small nation, with a population of a little less than 6 million people. But despite being one of NATO's smallest member states, Denmark has seen its fair share of action on the battlefields in Iraq, and especially in Afghanistan. From the end of 2001 until the middle of 2013, 43 Danish soldiers were killed and 211 were wounded in action in Afghanistan. Not much by American standards, I am aware. But during this period, Denmark was the NATO member with the highest rate of casualties and was also one of the biggest contributors to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), measured by population size. A 750-man-strong Danish battalion has, throughout the past decade, operated in Afghanistan's bloody Helmand province. Denmark has also contributed to the war effort with F-16 fighter jets, Leopard-2 tanks, medical facilities, mobile Air Force radar units, and logistical units. Last but not least, teams of Danish special operations forces—from the Frogman Corps to the Jaeger Corps—have been operating in Afghanistan since 2001, and continue to do so to this day.

As a Jaeger, I have worked with some of the most elite units in the world. I've met many excellent soldiers and some of them have become great friends, but I'd argue that my brothers in the Jaeger Corps are among the finest soldiers in the world. We are not the best equipped, nor are we blessed with extensive resources, but the integrity, skills, and mental toughness of my fellow operators are, in my experience, unsurpassed. I feel privileged and proud to have served with these men.

With this book, I have done my best to offer realistic and honest insight into my life as an operator in the Jaeger Corps without compromising the safety of the Jaegers or other members of the coalition serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. Identities, training missions, assignments and locations have

been altered where necessary.

This book is dedicated to my Jaeger brothers and colleagues still operative in the Corps. You know who you are. Thank you guys.

Thomas Rathsack

**Jaeger nr. 229**

## Chapter One: Living the Dream

We roar along at 155 miles per hour, about fifteen feet above ground level in the Iraqi desert. I sit on the outermost seat in the transport helicopter, feeling the heat of the motor exhaust against my left arm.

The night is black, but I have a clear view of the vast, flat landscape. It is dotted with bright spots created by the gas flares of countless oil refineries. Inside the cabin sit seven other Jaegers. The hollows of their eyes glow green through the faint light of my night vision goggles. As always, they look calm and relaxed.

I check my equipment and weapon, a C8 carbine, one final time. The helicopter's loadmaster, who directs us in and out of the cabin, sticks two fingers in the air. Two minutes from the target.

This is "Operation Viking." Its purpose: to identify and gather information about the enemy and, if necessary, take him down. Tonight, the mission is to destroy a weapons cache. Life had been hell during the last couple of months at Basra Air Station—once a civilian airport under Saddam Hussein, now home to Western coalition forces during "Operation Iraqi Freedom." It also served as home to the 500-man Danish DAN-BAT battalion's headquarters, a battalion under the command of a 4000-soldier British brigade. The base had been under attack throughout the winter and spring of 2007: The Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM) militia—led by the Shia Muslim cleric Muqtada al-Sadr—had been firing rockets at it from a radius of 3-6 miles up to 25 times a day.

A decision had been made to tackle the problem by locating JAM's weapon depots in the region. A few Jaeger Corps teams had been summoned for the task. In the previous 24 hours, 16 rockets had been launched at our camp. A British soldier was killed and two others critically wounded when a Chinese-built 107 mm rocket slammed into their sleeping quarters, transforming it into a bloody amalgamation of bones, blood, and stumps of twisted metal. When a reconnaissance patrol identified a depot 12 miles from the camp containing several 107 mm rockets, we became anxious to get there quickly and destroy them.

My team had just returned from a six-day operation and settled into rest and recovery mode when our platoon commander, known to us as "The Bicep", arrived to announce the new mission. Within an hour, we had studied the area in which the rocket depot was located, planned emergency procedures, and organized assistance from an unmanned surveillance aircraft which, from a height of 9000 feet, was capable of filming and reporting any activity on the ground before, during, and after the operation.

I was not the team's demolitions expert, but due to my experience with clearing landmines and the four years I'd spent in demolitions, I was tasked with gathering information about the rockets,

preparing an explosive charge, and working out a procedure for disabling the weapons.

And just like that, I'm in the helicopter, two minutes from the coordinates given to us by the team that discovered the weapons cache. The area is crawling with JAM units, recognized as the most belligerent militia fighters in Iraq. We have no desire to let our presence be detected.

Our reconnaissance team is still in the area and informs us over the encrypted radio that the landing zone is secure. One minute until we land. I am preparing to disembark first because I am the team's scout. I lean forward in the seat and get ready for the loadmaster's signal. Go, Go, Go! I jump into the Iraqi night and move swiftly away from the cloud of sand, gravel, and stones whipped up by the helicopter's blades. My seven teammates are right behind me. We hit the ground and form a circle to secure the landing zone. It is safe.

The helicopter takes off immediately, returning to standby at the base. Being our scout, I signal to the team already on the ground with my white spot, a passive light on my weapon visible only to those wearing night vision goggles. The flicker is answered and we join forces. The surveillance craft, Shadow, reports no enemy activity in the area.

We are only two or three miles away from a town from which two roads lead out to the depot. If anyone saw or heard our helicopter land, JAM militia forces would likely arrive in short order, traveling along one of those roads. This requires urgency. Our demolitions expert and I move toward the depot, about 150 feet from the landing zone, while the rest of the team hides behind sand dunes and secures our position. One of the rockets we came to destroy is on the ground, pointing in the direction of our camp. All it needs for launch is a homemade launch pad, or even just a few sand bags to prop it up.

We carefully place an explosive charge on the rockets, securing it using strong elastic bands to make sure it tightly covers the fuze—the rocket's most vital part since it ensures detonation. Destroy that, and the rocket is disarmed permanently.

I check everything again and report to our team leader, Kenneth, that everything is ready. He signals 'go' and I switch on the explosive charge, which has a two-minute delay. I count down from five and on "fire," my teammate, Rasmus, ignites the charge. We start our stopwatches.

I report over the radio that the charge is on. We scurry away and take cover behind a sand embankment about 100 feet from the rockets. The rest of my unit is another 300 feet away, defending our position in all directions.

I report one minute over the radio. "30 seconds...10 seconds...5 seconds." Then I bury my head in the sand and fold my hands behind my neck to protect it.

The deep, hollow blast cuts through the night air, its force lifting Rasmus and I off the ground.

Metal fragments whizz over our heads. A fragment the size of a frying pan burrows into the sand right behind us. Shaken by the ferocity of the explosion but otherwise fine, we report to Kenneth that we will carry out a battle damage assessment to ensure the rocket depot is destroyed.

We struggle to our feet and examine the big, smoldering crater. Bits of the rockets are spread over a several-hundred-feet radius. We seek out the rest of our team; they've already called the helicopter and formed a landing zone where it's scheduled to arrive in five minutes.

This is the most critical phase of the entire operation. The detonation has revealed our presence in the area. As we await the helicopter, I observe the roads, keeping a wary eye out for JAM militia units that may arrive at any moment. I'm trying to stabilize my hectic breathing. The British helicopter pilot announces over the radio that he is "two minutes out." Soon we hear the calming sound of distant blades chopping through the air.

At the same time, we receive a radio report of activity in our area. Suddenly, we can hear shouting from the reconnaissance team. It would be highly dangerous if we engaged in combat now. Our landing zone would be "hot," the helicopter would avoid landing, and we would have a serious problem.

"One minute out," sounds the report from the helicopter. We all switch on our small infrared strobe lights to indicate our position to the pilot.

We are still confused by the report of activity in the area, but without a clear identification, we decide to carry out the pick-up. The helicopter is now visible. It approaches low and fast and, as it slows down, converts the landing zone into a cloud of dust and sand. The pressure from the enormous blades forces us to lean forward to avoid falling.

Two blinks from the loadmaster's infrared torch means we can board. I am the first in the formation and accelerate with all my strength toward the helicopter's ramp to jump into the machine's belly. I throw myself into the seat against the cabin wall. As soon as everyone is aboard, the helicopter takes off with screeching turbines. With a sharp turn we are on our way back to the camp.

The operation has gone as planned. The rocket depot has been destroyed and we were not compromised. Without endangering our own security, we have stopped part of the rocket rain that had been making life in the camp more and more stressful, often necessitating staying in the camp's bomb shelters overnight. Of course, we have not put an end to JAM and its mission to destabilize southern Iraq and assume power. But we have made it more difficult for the militia to continue its fight against us.

I look through the helicopter's cabin and see the teeth of seven sweaty, smiling, camouflaged faces. I'm smiling too. I have been involved in boosting security for our troops and I feel that "Operation Viking" has been a mission that vindicates my life in the Jaeger Corps.



This is what it is all about for me—to complete a real war operation with my Jaeger mates after years of grueling training. From when I was nine years old, donning camouflage gear and sneaking out at night to patrol the old defense fortress near my childhood home in Copenhagen, to my time as a 14-year-old training hard in preparation for joining the Royal Guard, this has been my dream. I think back to the punishing selection process and the sense of relief when I received the burgundy beret and the Jaeger mark on my shoulder. I also recall my disillusionment and subsequent resignation from the corps, and the reason for returning after eight years.

It was because of a mission like this one.

## Chapter Two: From Indian kayak to the burgundy beret

My first real memory of the Jaeger Corps is of a day when, as a young lad in my teenage years, I noticed the title page of a newspaper depicting a dirty, bearded man with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. The story was about a Jaeger named Carsten Morch who had participated in a U.S. Ranger Course for elite soldiers and graduated as the honor man. I studied the picture and the story of the brutal conditions Morch had to undergo in the camp and the challenges he'd overcome.

It was the 24<sup>th</sup> of October, 1984, and the seed had been planted.

After reading about Carsten Morch, Jaeger number 172, my general interest was replaced by a true desire to become a Jaeger. I wanted to be a part of this elite military unit, the mystery, these super men—I was sure that if I could become a Jaeger soldier, I would be able to walk on water and the rest of my life would be a breeze. From there on out, I lived for my goal of becoming a Jaeger soldier, and the next six years of my young life were completely devoted to reaching it. Everything else seemed entirely meaningless. The dream of the burgundy beret was driving me forward.

I was born in 1967 and grew up in Charlottenlund, north of Copenhagen. My father was a lawyer, historian, and professor at the University of Copenhagen. My mother was a qualified medical secretary, but to the delight of me and my brother—five years my senior and now a lawyer—she was mostly at home.

Ours was a safe and practical household. My parents enforced few restrictions and had limited expectations or demands of us boys. But they always backed me up on the choices I made. I was raised in a slightly conservative fashion by today's standards, particularly in terms of manners and polish. I received my fair share of spankings, but then I typically deserved them, and I can't exactly say I've been traumatized by it.

Overall, I was a happy and easygoing kid.

From a very young age, I loved nature and could spend hours playing and messing about in it. I was always staring into the gravel in front of the house, and my parents worried that there was something wrong with my vision. I could see perfectly well; I was just trying not to tread on the ants. I had this desire to protect animals that has not decreased a bit over the years.

I was also a very active sportsman. I swam, played badminton, tennis, soccer, ran, trained with weights, and shot rifles. I spent what time was left over playing soldier. When I was eight or nine, I bought a Portuguese camouflage uniform with my own savings, and my friend Frederick and I began to set alarms in the middle of the night where we'd leap awake and jump into our uniforms. Without my

parents knowing about it—and they still don't—I'd sneak out of the house and into the woods where we'd build bases and caves and go around patrolling. We also had a toy kayak—one decorated in stereotypical Native American fashion—we spray-painted camouflage green and paddled over the moat at Charlottenlund Fort. There, we'd make commando raids against people in the campsite.

We'd make small homemade explosives out of firecrackers, lengthening the fuses to give us a delay of 10-15 seconds during which we'd run into the bushes, hiding from the campers awakened by the sound who would come out and shout at us.

I was having too much fun to worry much about school; I was a mediocre student at best and largely absentminded. I'd sit around thinking about nature, sports, and the life of a soldier. But, in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my schoolmates and I were tasked with finding internships. My attitude toward academia changed immediately. I'd be spending a week with the Royal Guard in Copenhagen, and I had every intention of taking it very seriously. Several months before my internship, I began core training, trail running, running with a heavy backpack, and running an obstacle course. Our neighbor, a former member of the home guard, lent me his old uniform and a pair of worn out boots that I'd wear when running around the forest.

My friends and family constantly reminded me that it was just an internship.

But I insisted that it was of utmost importance that I perform as well as possible during this week.

And it turned out to be an absolutely fantastic week for me.

A lance corporal took me and five other interns through each day's exercises. First, we went to the shooting range and shot G3 7.62mm rifles—much more powerful than anything I had fired before, with greater recoil that really jerked the shoulder. From there, we ran the tank trail—up and down, up and down—the corporal pattering behind us in a military jeep, shouting at us to push forward. This was where I really shined: All my physical training had paid off, and I was able to show off my great shape. Every morning we'd also participate in the Life Guards morning workout, and even as 13-year-old, I kept pace with the professional soldiers. I was actually better than most, and finished in the top 25 percent.

This proved to me that I was on track to my goals, and fueled my dream of becoming a professional soldier even more.

But only after reading about Carsten Morch as a 17-year-old did I really become focused on my goal. My dream of the Jaeger Corps was the only thing any importance to me. I planned my workout systematically, day by day, week by week, and year by year. I ran hundreds of miles in my boots and uniform. I also did trail running and orientation dressed in my gear, filling my rucksack with bricks, big

books, and bags of salt weighing 70 pounds. I walked the dark and cold roads and woods of northern Zealand, rain or shine, summer or winter. Sometimes I walked 60 miles from Copenhagen to the north coast and back again through forests and villages. I swam in the icy ocean, wearing my old borrowed Home Guard uniform and those same worn-out leather boots. I'd sleep for days at a time in the forests of Northern Zealand to get used to the darkness and isolation. A training of four to six hours a day became normal routine, and even though I was constantly tired, cold, hungry, and wet, I continued on with bloodied feet—driven by a smoldering desire to become a Jaeger.

Even as a young boy, I knew the conventional and bourgeois lifestyle—with a fixed and predictable framework of rules—didn't appeal to me. I wanted to feel and taste the world.

In addition to my workouts and my final years in school, I managed to get a little work washing dishes at a local restaurant. I also had a paper route and worked at a small newsstand at the local train station. But it only really felt like work for me when I got into the military as an 18-year-old.

I began Sergeant School at Sønderborg Barracks and continued on to the Reserve Officer School in Oksbøl. There, I encountered my first notable setback: I failed the final lieutenant exam in the subject of tactics. I continued, however, as a sergeant in the Royal Guard in Copenhagen for four years.

My career took a turn for the serious when, in January and February of 1990, I had to pass a series of physical tests that the physical training officer was supervising—a necessary step before I could be accepted into the Jaeger Corps patrol course. Nowadays, the recruitment at Værløse Air Base happens once a year and includes a ten-day pre-seminar that didn't exist in 1990.

At the time of my entering the selection course, requirements hadn't changed since they were set in 1961. They went as follows: A Jaeger is a specially trained soldier who has undergone specific training, which enables him to solve a wide range of demanding tasks. Therefore much is demanded of a Jaeger, with an emphasis on good skills in patrol techniques and tactics, self-discipline, self-confidence and resourcefulness. There should be high morale, discipline and perseverance, and a high degree of ability to work together, often under harsh conditions, both during training and during insertion of different operations. Therefore only the soldiers who pass the initial phase of training very convincingly will receive the burgundy red beret and later the Jaeger shoulder label, which is the main characteristic of a Jaeger. It goes without saying that a Jaeger should have no diseases, normal hearing and vision, and must not be colorblind. His physical abilities have to be outstanding. It is equally important that he is mentally strong, performs competently under pressure, is credible and trustworthy, has great willpower, a highly developed sense of cooperation, mutual respect for other Jaegers, and always possesses a one-hundred-percent professional attitude toward the work.

Many people believe that you must be some kind of a macho type and a big beefcake to become a Jaeger but this is far from true. There is also a need for small Jaegers, and the men who comprise the unit range in size from 150 to 220 pounds and shoe sizes 36 to 48. I myself weigh 180 pounds, am six feet tall, and wear a size 44 shoe.

To give you an idea of how selective the military is in selecting Jaegers, between 1961 and 2009, only 362 Jaegers were trained, or on average eight Jaegers per year. There was one year where there was only one man deemed worthy of joining the squadron of 50-60 Jaegers. The main task of the Corps is to be inserted into both domestic and international operations, where conventional forces cannot be used because they lack the specific training necessary, and aren't equipped to carry out the task at hand especially in extreme, often dangerous conditions.

Working as a Jaeger typically demands that no one discover us. To solve problems without being compromised is what we consider a Jaeger's noblest task, and this is more easily accomplished when operating in a small squad of six to eight men.

I began my nine-week-long patrol-training course on my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday. The course aimed to teach us how to work cooperatively in small teams and introduce us to basic principles such as sailing a rubber dinghy, helicopter training, building rope bridges, swimming in cold water, operating at night, and infiltrating a target without being seen. We were outdoors almost all the time in those nine weeks, and we were constantly tired, hungry, wet, and cold. We performed an extraordinary number of marches during that time, but I was fortunate in that I had been well prepared by the intense training I'd been conducting on my own for almost two years. I'd been on hiking trips by myself that were worse than what I experienced in the course and was almost in excessively good shape at the beginning. I was constantly in the upper quarter of my class and didn't have any big weaknesses—there was never a point where I wondered if I could handle it.

I was one of 94 hopeful lads at the beginning of the course, but you have to, as described in the admission requirements, pass with "very satisfactory" marks to go ahead to the Jaeger selection course. 38 of the 94 passed the course, but only 25 did so with "very satisfactory" marks. I was one of those that met the requirements. After one week's break, we were ready to begin our eight-week-long Jaeger selection course, together with 10 other Jaeger candidates from the previous year. Jaeger aspirant is a more individual-oriented seminar, where you are still assessed according to your ability to cooperate, but 70% of the time you work for and with yourself. The purpose is to break down the individual, to see his reaction patterns under extreme physical and psychological pressure. The eight weeks are a hard test, only interrupted by a single weekend off. The worst was the uncertainty. You never knew what would happen, and everything had to happen quickly. When we bought food in the chow hall, we were

already eating it in line to the checkout. Everything in between exercises was to be done running, even in the chow hall and the toilets. I'm sure it was hilarious for other soldiers to constantly see Jaeger applicants running around the Air Base, but as one of those applicants, I remember being too tired and worn out to see the humor in it. If you forgot to run, you were immediately "rewarded" with 40 pushups. Forget to run once more, and you were "rewarded" with a nice 8-miles run around the Air Base in the evening while your colleagues enjoy their well-deserved time off.

The most physically exhausting and punishing exercise was the so-called cold-water habituation, which involved jumping into the freezing-cold seawater every morning while wearing our boots and uniforms, diving after lead at the bottom of the marina or the open-air pool in Aalborg.

Another really bad one came during "Wet Week," where for five days, we were relentlessly soaked in cold water. Approximately every two hours, we were ordered to the dams of the area, drenched, and weren't allowed to change out of our waterlogged clothes.

There was also the elimination run, where we ran up and down in a gravel pit until a number of guys simply collapsed and were therefore eliminated from the seminar. Those who remained standing passed. Simple, but brutal.

Another tool of elimination was the weekly self-esteem test. Amongst other things, we'd climb a 450-foot high pylon, balancing only on a 7-inch wide beam. We followed this with what was lovingly referred to as a "death wall." Here, candidates would have to let themselves fall forward with hands at their sides from 30 feet above a pool—this often resulted in painful belly flops. These tests of self-esteem or confidence were designed to filter out the ones who doubt—because doubting is something a Jaeger should never do. I must admit, as the seminar progressed, the ones who got chunked out gave me a sort of cynical satisfaction. I was still standing.

And I was convinced I'd stay standing and pass the seminar as long as I didn't acquire any debilitating injuries. But after four weeks of brutal punishment, injuries happened. I developed serious infections on both of my shins. They became so bad that fluids swelled up into abscesses, boils as big as tennis balls hanging over the edges of my boots. I was granted two afternoons to go see a doctor and get treated with some pressure pads on the legs, and was even allowed to take a few prescribed painkillers. But it wasn't a free pass: I had to complete the exercises the others did in my absence at night. Since I didn't get to rest, the inflammation didn't go away completely and stayed with me for the rest of the seminar, if only a little less severe than it was in the beginning. It was obviously something that worried me, but not for a single second did I consider giving up. I was so keen, so focused on achieving my goal, that fate could level anything at me, and I would overcome it. I'd had this dream for so many years; there was nothing in the world that could destroy it. Of course, the prolonged wear and

tear on my physique and psyche was a true abuse of the body. Elite athletes live harmoniously with the right amount of sleep, the right kind of diet, they are never wet or cold for a long time, and their bodies get massages, physiotherapy, and the appropriate amount of time to recover. We got a minimum amount of sleep at best, and sometimes no sleep at all. In fact, we typically slept between five and ten hours total from Monday to Friday, and when also being subjected to constant physical and mental pressure, that left no opportunity to recharge.

During the patrol course I had to run and walk 540 miles. During the selection course I managed 690 miles, and at one point I did 40 miles with 90 pounds of equipment in less than 12 hours. Another time, I did 30 miles—twice—within 48 hours. I also swam 28 miles.

I managed all of it and was typically—as I was during the patrol seminar—amongst the top five candidates. My extremely good physical condition and my ability to adapt helped me stay on track. I was good at shutting out all negative thoughts and was constantly focusing on the positive side of things. I'd tell myself things like “it's just pain,” or “you won't die of this,” and “in four weeks this will all be over and your life will change completely.” I did my best to constantly show that I was not going to give up, no matter what. There was never a time when I hesitated; I wanted to make sure the instructors didn't doubt me.

At the same time I tried to keep a certain degree of humility as a person, because I knew that the Corps also filters out people with big egos and dominant traits. My only big blunder was the one time I forgot my key in my room. Nine out of ten times this would never have been discovered, but I was so unfortunate, I was asked to grab something from my closet on that day, and since my buddy wasn't there, I couldn't enter the room. I was “rewarded” for that little blunder with a metal key almost six feet long and weighing about 45 pounds that I was forced to drag around with me for five days. On patrol. To the toilet. Everywhere. The thing that pissed me off the most about this was that I had now been noticed in a negative way. Of course, it was also very annoying as an extra load the others didn't have to bear, but the punishment cast me in a light that called attention to me as less than the best. I couldn't stand it. But that was the point. Just like when a guy lost his map and was forced to carry around a six-foot-tall piece of cardboard, or the slowest runner was issued a yellow safety helmet and jacket that he had to wear constantly, it taught a valuable lesson. Looking back, I still think this is a fine way of punishing people. It was certainly very effective, for I have never forgotten a key since.

At the end of the course, we concluded with a final confidence test: an 60 feet free-fall into a lake, followed by 40 pushups and a shot of “Doctor's Special,” a cocktail mixed from various types of booze. I passed the course with seven others out of a class of 35 applicants. I've never been as proud as the moment when the commander of the selection course uttered the magic words I will never forget,

“Rathsack, it is too good to be true.” I received the Jaeger Corps’ badge—a Jaeger Horn pin I adhered to my regular black beret. The burgundy beret had to wait until I’d completed more hurdles and education.

Shortly thereafter, I completed a two-week course of parachute training and a three-week combat swimmer course at the Danish Frogman Corps. Even though I was not becoming a frogman soldier, water couldn’t be an obstacle in achieving my goal on a mission. For that course, I was thrown into the wide-open sea and forced to swim six miles, dive 30 feet down, and do different exercises such as tying a series of knots underwater. I also got acquainted with Maren, a fallen tree log weighing more than 700 pounds that we students all carried around during exercises in the woods. On a warm and sunny morning in the summer of 1990, I stood, slightly sunburned after my three weeks in the Frogman Corps, next to my fellow aspirants at the Aalboorg Air Base for our graduation ceremony. I had been looking forward to this moment for 10 years. It was the absolute highlight of my life when my superior placed the burgundy beret on my head for the first time. I was now accepted into the Jaeger Corps as Jaeger number 229. The acceptance came with conditions, though: I was still considered something of student. I still would need to undergo a full year of Jaeger training before my peers would view me as a full Jaeger. Only then would I be allowed to wear the ultimate Jaeger mark: the shoulder badge with the title “JAEGER”. Only then could I go on specific missions and operations for the Corps.



## Chapter Three: No oxygen

I felt like I was flying. To be the owner of a burgundy beret and nearly through my year of training almost gave me wings. Following Jaeger training, I began exercises abroad, working on my training in communications, medical skills, demolitions and specialized-weapons training. Each day brought me closer to becoming a real Jaeger.

But one of the most fundamental skills of all these, the one the Corps is best known for and one which commands respect from Special Forces all around the world, is its parachute operations. And in the summer of 1991 in Aalborg, I was experiencing for the first time the Corp's highly specialized oxygen jump.

At that time, I loved skydiving. I participated in every jump that I could. Beside the four or five weeks a year I spent training in the Jaeger Corps, I also took part in the military national team training tours and military events such as anniversaries, as well as in civilian parachute engagements and demonstrations such as sports events, festivals, and so on.

A jump on a warm summer day with a light chute and without heavy equipment is one thing. The military oxygen jump is another case entirely. It involves altitudes three times higher than a normal jump. A jump like this, on a cold and dark winter night, equipped with oxygen and many pounds of equipment, leaping into an unfamiliar landing zone, is a journey into the unknown. It is hard work and it involves significant risks.

There are two kinds of oxygen jumps: HAHO and HALO. HAHO means "High Altitude, High Opening" and implies that the jump happens from the aircraft's maximum altitude of 30,000 feet—5.7 miles altitude. The Jaeger releases his parachute and navigates with a compass to sail behind enemy lines. The advantage of the HAHO jump is that the Jaeger is inserted a relatively large distance from the designated target. In good conditions, I have floated a distance of 40 miles in the air above Northern Jutland. After landing with the rest of the team, landing zones are secured, the parachutes are buried, and the Jaegers continues to solve the task at hand. The disadvantage of HAHO jumps is that there is a relatively high risk of being detected from the ground, because you float in the air for up to 50 minutes.

The other option is the HALO jump, which stands for "High Altitude, Low Opening." The jump still happens 5.7 miles up, but the Jaeger waits until the last minute to pull the chute. This minimizes the risk of being detected while in the air. During a normal parachute jump, the speed during free-fall is approximately 125 miles per hour. Due to the thin air at the higher altitudes of the HALO jump, the Jaeger achieves speeds of 250 miles per hour. The disadvantage of HALO jumps is that the Jaeger must be dropped a lot closer to the target, since he does not float in the air for long.

Whether participating in a HAHO or HALO jump, both require a large amount of preparation. A Jaeger's backpack must be packed very carefully with necessary equipment—food, water, sleeping bags, clothing, observational equipment, commo gear, ammunition, and explosives. The backpack might end up weighing 140 pounds, and so it is of the utmost importance that the weight be distributed evenly, or it could have fatal consequences during free-fall. In the case of an unstable load, a Jaeger may only have an unstable fall, or he could end up in an uncontrollable spin, making him lose consciousness due to the violent centrifugal forces. As an important part of the preparation phase, one always packs one's own parachute and equipment by themselves.

A Jaeger's compass and altimeter are strapped to the front, the breathing bottles are mounted in a special pocket on the harness, and the weapon is kept out of the way of their parachute's pull cords. In the hours before the jump, I would always go through the pack containing my parachute, my rucksack, and my other equipment meticulously, making sure I checked everything one last time before takeoff.

Sitting in a Hercules C-130 transport aircraft, I felt, after my two previous HALO jumps, that I was ready for my first HAHO jump. The Hercules is not exactly famous for its high level of comfort: A red net strung along the sides of the cabin functions as seating, and the concept of air conditioning is completely unknown to this aircraft's design. Onboard, you either sweat like a pig or freeze your ass off.

My team and I were connected to the aircraft's joint oxygen system, and next to me sat my patrol leader, Morten—a stocky, stern, but friendly guy in his late twenties. Morten had already completed over 600 jumps, and the confidence that came from that experience was very reassuring to the rest of us. He turned to me, and even though he was wearing his oxygen mask, I could see that he was smiling.

I admired Morten's natural coolness in high-tension environments. But it also annoyed me a little; I knew I could never be as calm and collected as he was. Naturally, I was a bit scared my first time trying the dangerous jump. I was already soaked in sweat under my many layers of clothing and my gray, uncomfortable jumper suit. I could taste the saltiness of it on the rubber of my oxygen mask. I was comforted to see that Morten's face was also covered in beads of sweat.

Minutes remained before we'd be jumping out into the cold and inhospitable skies, 30,000 feet above Danish ground. Everyone was tense, concentrated and focused.

We'd soon be hurtling through -20-degree air, plummeting toward earth wearing backpacks weighing 120 pounds fastened to our bodies.

Exposed skin, in these conditions, will result in almost instantaneous frostbite. I'm sporting

large mittens to protect my hands and a dickey around my neck. My helmet, goggles, and oxygen mask protect my face and head. The oxygen mask is fastened to the helmet with two buckles and a pair of heavy rubber bands for security. My rucksack is connected to the parachute harness with what is called a ‘lowering line’, which allows me to release the bag just before landing, making my own landing a lot safer. The backpack is fastened to the back of my legs, with the bottom facing upwards—I have a leg through each shoulder strap. This ensures the most natural position for the lower body during the jump, but also makes for a very unnatural position while sitting down before the jump.

Our plane was no longer rising, and it began to bank right. We had reached our jump altitude. The aircraft’s cargo ramp opened slowly, and a soft, warm ray of sunshine filled the cabin. My four teammates simultaneously turned their heads and look toward the fully opened cargo ramp.

Our jumpmaster, Mike, clapped his hands and then held up six fingers, meaning six minutes until we’d exit the aircraft. Any form of speech was impossible, since we were wearing our oxygen masks. And even without the masks, it would be virtually impossible to understand anyone with the intense engine noise of the Hercules.

Shortly after, Mike made a slow, circular, upward motion with his arms, almost as if he were directing an orchestra.

It was the signal for us to stand up. We looked like a bunch of old men due to our restricted and awkward movements. It took us a long time to reach a half-upright fetal position. We disconnected from the shared oxygen system and turned our own supplies on so the team’s “oxygen medic” could do his final check. He stood in front of each and every one of us, looked us in the eyes, and gave us the thumbs-up. We returned the stare, nodded, and gave him the thumbs-up right back. Then, Mike concluded the final check-ups of the equipment and the parachutes.

Everything was as it should be, and he acknowledged this by giving me a friendly shoulder squeeze.

Now, the rest was up to me, my parachute, and the sky above Aalborg.

“Two minutes.”

We all turned to face the ramp. Mike ushered us along. I was at the end of the line, and the four jumpers in front of me stood out in a clear silhouette against the sharp sunlight. In a bizarre moment of contemplation, they reminded me of four penguins, with their small and rigid steps.

Mike clapped his hands together and lifted one finger.

“One minute.”

I could feel my heart beating rapidly against my chest and was suddenly very cognizant of my sweating as I saw the finely detailed map appearing under me. It was a wondrous sight.

I could see the southern tip of Norway and Skagen, the northern tip of Denmark, and the city of Aalborg just north of the air base, which was our target.

We continued slowly scooting toward the platform in a tight row, as it was important to get off the plane in very quick succession. The plane soared through the sky at 400 miles per hour, a full 190 miles per hour faster than it would travel at normal altitude due to the thin air. As a result, if the pause between our jumps became too large, it would be almost impossible to achieve the desired "string of pearls" formation during our fall, or even locate each other upon landing.

"10 seconds."

The last time signal had been given and the man up front inched to the edge of the ramp. The red lamps on each side of the ramp lit up clearly. There was Mike with his hand on the first man's shoulder, looking at the lamp with only a few seconds to go. Then, the lamps turned green. Mike gave the first man a hard pat on the back, and he jumped with his arms wide open, disappearing behind the ramp. I made tiny steps behind Morten. Mike patted him on the back, and he jumped immediately, without hesitation—this was his own little pleasure trip.

When I made my leap, I was instantly hit by speed and turbulence. My goggles were so foggy, I could hardly see anything. I could just barely make out a Jaeger who had just drawn his chute. With his calm and calculating movement, it could only be Morten. I stretched out my arms to increase my stability in the air. My backpack felt balanced and fine, so I found my release handle with my right arm and compensated for the movement with my left arm, which I placed behind my head. Then, I pulled the handle, stretching out my hands and readying myself for the sharp tug of the parachute when it takes in air. But not even the most in-depth preparations could have prepared me for the jolt I experienced traveling from 400 miles per hour to next to nothing in a fraction of a second. I was thrown forward into the harness and had no control over my movement. The pressure was pushing the air out of my lungs, and I moaned loudly. Looking up, I found that my parachute had unfolded perfectly, and was billowing with air.

A relief. But there's a nagging feeling—an icy cold wind whipping against my face and a tingling sensation in my mouth and lips. The kind of feeling I shouldn't have been having at that moment, hanging in a parachute 30,000 feet above the surface of the earth.

I knew immediately what had happened. My oxygen mask, jerked off the right side of my face, was now only hanging in the left lock. This was really bad—on par with a parachute malfunction. This sort of catastrophe was what every HAHO jumper fears most: Without oxygen at this height, I would pass out at within seconds. I'd learned my limitations from controlled trails at the Flight Medical Institute, and estimated I had less than 30 seconds before I would black out and float lifelessly through

the air, with no influence on where I might end up. Worst-case scenario? This would be my last 30 seconds alive.

My options were limited. I could take off my mittens and try to pull my mask back on to get the necessary oxygen, but doing so would give me extreme frostbite, which could result in me not being able to use my hands properly. I might even lose a mitten or two in the attempt, which could result in permanent frostbite. If that happened, I might never be able to use my hands as a soldier ever again.

Alternatively, I could try to fumble my mask back into place with my mittens still on. Both solutions would be very difficult to accomplish, and still presented a high risk of my failing and slipping into unconsciousness.

Career-ending frostbite or unconsciousness and death?

For me, that was like asking if I'd prefer the plague or cholera. But I had to make the decision immediately.

I was 24 years old and a Jaeger. Exposure to more pain didn't frighten me. I had constantly pushed my tolerance level and forced my body to endure immense suffering. But I did not want to ruin my hands by pulling those mittens off.

So the mittens-on approach it was. I grabbed at the fluttering oxygen mask, the mitten covering the entire thing given its size. I placed the mask in front of my mouth and jaw. With the other hand, I pushed against the buckle of the helmet. The sun shined directly into my face as if to remind me of my impending doom—like the light at the end of a tunnel. It pushed me to fight even harder.

I have no idea if it took me 10 or 30 seconds to struggle with the mask, but suddenly I heard the liberating clicking sound of the buckle snapping into place.

I let go of the mask and it fit tightly over my mouth. The beautiful, cool, and slightly metallic taste of oxygen once again flowed into my airway. I caught my breath and felt almost high, reveling in my victory in the battle against time.

But I couldn't allow myself much time of time to think about my close call. Now that the immediate danger was over, I needed to get back on course. The wind blew from the west and was leading me towards northern Jutland. I loosened my steering handle and corrected my course. I couldn't see any one of my teammates, but if I kept this direction I knew that I would land roughly in the vicinity of the proposed landing area northwest of the Aalborg Air Base.

There were a few robust-looking cumulus clouds that were going to be an obstacle for my path. If we can, we always try and steer clear of clouds. A jumper can experience severe turbulence inside a cloud, and it can be very difficult to orient oneself given the lack of visibility.

I found myself at an altitude of 20,000 feet, the cloud directly in front of me. If I tried to get

around it, I might get too far off course. And since I probably didn't have enough time to get around it anyways, I maintained my course and continued into the milky-white, dense, moist fog. I had never flown into such a dense cloud before, and I was surprised at how much it tugged and tore at my parachute. I got the uncomfortable feeling of not being completely fastened to my harness. I pulled my steering handle closer and reduced my speed a bit. This is a standard procedure we use to steer clear of other Jaegers.

A remarkable silence spread, only interrupted by the flickering of the cells on the chute. I looked down, and to my astonishment, realized I couldn't even see my own boots. I was lost in a miasma and could see less than six feet.

My compass and my altimeter were my only two points of reference in this blindness. The clouds felt as though they continued on interminably. Again, I sensed a certain feeling of uncertainty sneaking up on me. But then, a moment later, the light finally became sharper again.

Never before had I been so happy to see my old, worn out "Danner Boots." Shortly after, the horizon unfolded itself in front of me and the Northern part of Denmark reappeared, clear and green.

The needle of my altimeter swung past the 12,000 feet mark, and I had a cloudless sky in front of me. I loosened my oxygen mask and let it fall to the side, enjoying the thrill of reaching breathable air. In my feeling of victory I stretched out my hands to open up all the cells in my parachute, gathering as much velocity as possible for the final push toward the landing zone.

Down to my mates.

Down to familiar things and comfort.

When I reached 500 feet above the ground, I made sure to face toward the wind, and upon reaching 60 feet, I braked. I collapsed when I landed. That's not altogether unusual in HAHO jumping; after half an hour spent in the air with reduced blood circulation to the legs due to the tight fit of the harness in the groin area, my feet and legs were completely numb. In addition to this, I struggled to maintain my balance given the heavy weight of my equipment. Slowly, I made it to my feet, rolled up my parachute, and tried to determine the reason why my oxygen mask had come undone. As it turned out, one of the rubber bands holding it in place had snapped as a result of the extreme conditions. It is crazy to think that something as trivial as a damned rubber band could have cost me my life.

But now, this day's work was over. As we traveled back to the air base by truck, me sitting in the bed, I looked down at my shaking hands. The night before, I had been sitting with my comrades, drinking beer in Aalborg, talking with excitement about the day's challenges. But not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined this jump would involve me fighting for my life. But I had pulled through, and with that thought, the tingling in my hands and the uncomfortable ride were rendered

almost pleasant.

Although I always approached these jumps with optimism and confidence, the oxygen mask incident wasn't the only time I experienced a terrifying, near-catastrophic mishap during a jump. While training with the military national team in the United Arab Emirates, I was tasked for the first time in my career with a "precision jump," using a type of parachute quite different than the usual military chutes. It was larger, and consequently more sensitive and responsive to the steering handle, which makes it easier to land with precision. I was to land on a mattress, with one of my heels hitting a spot not much bigger than a quarter.

The jumping area was in the middle of the desert, so I had a clear line of sight to target. I thought I was doing quite well until I realized—while a mere 30 feet above the ground—that I would probably miss the mattress by a bit. Not a disaster, but I wanted to get as close to the finishing point as possible. So I gave my steering handle a sharp pull to brake, hoping to give myself more time to line up my landing. But I'd forgotten that this wasn't like the parachutes I'd worked with in the past, and my pull caused such a sudden change that the parachute became completely drained of air. For a moment, it hung above me, as relaxed as a condom. That was followed by a lightning-fast drop to the ground. I landed on my ass, directly on my tailbone, while trying catch myself with my right arm. I hit the ground so hard that the other Jaegers who witnessed my crash were certain I had broken my back. Fortunately, I hadn't. My forearm, however, didn't fare so well. It looked pretty ludicrous, actually, bent into an almost zigzagged shape at the wrist.

Shortly after, I was picked up at the jump site by a Huey helicopter and flown to a nearby hospital where we landed on the roof. I was greeted by another dilemma. A big, fat German chief medic gave me two choices: Either I could get the arm put into place immediately, which would be best for the healing process but performed without anesthesia, or I could get it straightened out later, under anesthesia, which would result in a longer healing process. Naturally, faced with a longer delay for the sake of comfort, chose the first option. Before I knew it, my patrol leader, Morten, and a paramedic are holding my shoulders while the German medic pushes my arm back into place. I came close to fainting during that episode, watching this guy jerk my broken arm around. It seemed to take forever. When he finally released his iron grip of my broken arm, I sank back into my chair—exhausted but relieved. The typically formal and eloquent Morten laughed at me loudly and exclaimed, "During my training as a paramedic in Danish hospitals I've seen lots of dead people, but not one of them has ever been as white in the face as you were today."





## **Chapter Four: Survival and shattered dreams**

There are many anecdotes surrounding the Jaeger combat survival course, and understandably so. Organized by the 22<sup>nd</sup> Special Air Service of the British elite troops, the SAS, this legendary course is taken by dozens of other countries' elite units as well as our own. It's a highly demanding course in the preliminary Jaeger training, a course that aims to teach the Jaeger how to survive after escaping a battle situation behind enemy lines. It focuses on utilizing escape techniques, relying on what nature gives you to escape and evade while being chased by the enemy's hunter force. And most notably, course participants learn what they might be exposed to during interrogation and incarceration if caught.

This course should really have been part of my basic Jaeger training, but our British organizers cancelled it that year as a result of the Gulf War in Kuwait in 1991. So I only began the course in November, 1992, more than a year after I'd been presented with my Jaeger badge and diploma. But until I passed this survival course, I couldn't consider myself a fully accomplished Jaeger.

The first 10 days were spent learning theory and doing exercises before we were sent to the Black Mountains in Wales for an additional 10 days. There, we'd learn how to survive while freezing, starving, and being on the run.

Our class consisted of 80 students and we were given some old rags, a few old tires, and a dozen sheep. The scraps of fabric were to be sewn into clothing, the tires were to become the soles of our shoes, and the sheep—in addition to giving us food—were also raw material for warm clothing we'd desperately need while in the cold and rainy mountains in the middle of November. Warm clothing, especially, is essential. So, armed with my dull Swiss Army knife, I got the dubious honor of slitting the throat of a sheep, which yielded anything but a quick and painless death for the poor animal.

We were forced to move fast in those first hours. We only had a little time to sew, cut, and adjust our gear before the evening settled in and it became darker and even colder. I managed to make myself a pair of shoes, a hat, a jacket, and a pair of mittens from the sheep's wool. Of course, none of my items were particularly well made, and the wool was also moist—there was no time to dry the skin, and it was still damp with blood.

Upon arrival, I got partnered up with two Danish operators from the Frogman Corps. Now, it was vital to get back to our “own lines,” which we’d made note of on a map of the area we’d drawn ourselves, sight unseen. No food or drink was provided, so after a few days of eating only sheep’s meat, we were forced to live off only roots and berries we found in the area. We found water in wells, which, fortunately, were abundant.

In this escape phase, a hunter force consisting of units from the British Parachute Regiment—PARA—constantly chased us. They pursued us in helicopters, vehicles, and on foot using their infrared and thermal equipment and dogs. In the daylight, we’d hole up, which proved a challenge beyond the ordinary, because apart from it being windy and very rainy, the Black Mountains are characterized by having no natural hiding places: no caves, grottoes, or closed forest areas. There were only a few smaller pine groves to seek shelter in, and so we’d press ourselves down into small holes in the ground and in abandoned animal tunnels to try to get some sleep.

At night, we moved toward our own lines, sheltered by the darkness.

As we approached the 10<sup>th</sup> day - the damp smell of our homemade sheep’s clothing was now unspeakably powerful – the hunter forces still hadn’t discovered us but we knew that we were going to be captured soon. The issue was not if we would get caught, but when. It was the course’s final test, and everyone needed to have the experience of being captured as well as that of making an escape.

When we arrived in a small gorge, we all began to feel that we were about to be discovered. And we were right. In a blink, a dozen PARA soldiers surrounded us. We couldn’t do anything about it, and we didn’t resist. The soldiers were yelling and shouting, “you’re done! You’re nobodies! Nothing but worthless fucks!”

I was blindfolded, tied up, and thrown into a pool of mud. They kicked me in the balls, in the stomach, and they slapped me with bare hands while they laughed in my face. “You miserable fuck!”

I was a POW. A prisoner of war held captive at the enemy base for a 36-hour-long interrogation phase. For these 36 hours, I had to, except during the actual interrogation, be in a so-called “stress position.”

For instance, one of these stress positions involved me standing up against the wall at a 45-degree angle, with my arms and legs spread wide. Another, I had to sit cross-legged on the floor, with my arms raised above my head, the fingertips just touching, but they weren’t allowed to rest on my head. My arms and legs were constantly cramping with fatigue, but if I tried to adjust slightly, I was reminded that this was forbidden by a swift kick from a guard.

I also had a hood over my head, so I couldn’t see anything, and there was a large speaker in the room that gave off a constant, harsh, rattling noise. I could hear nothing else. It was deeply unpleasant

and painful, and when I got close to fainting from pain or fatigue, the PARA guards would beat me. Occasionally, one of the captors would pull me outside, undress me, and throw me around in the icy mud while they just stood there and laughed.

This kind of hell was only interrupted by interrogations with different types of interrogators. There was a good guy, a bad guy, and a woman who commanded me to undress in front of her, after which she mocked me for having a sad little Danish dick.

At the time, I was only allowed to say my name, my number, and my rank. Anything else would result in failing the course and immediately having to return to my unit. Today, that's no longer the rule. A captured prisoner is now supposed to answer everything their captor asks in hopes of surviving. Wars have become like that. Our enemies no longer abide by the conventions of war, but will simply slit the throat of any prisoner who doesn't cooperate.

Although I knew the interrogation I was undergoing was just a game, between the exhaustion, fatigue, cold, uncertainty, and humiliation, it was difficult to differentiate between reality and fantasy. This was the phase where most of my fellow students dropped out. I could hear grown men, elite soldiers, break: sobbing in their native tongue before being dragged out and sent home. But somehow I managed to think ahead and forget about the pain. Sometimes, I'd reach the point where I thought the violence I was facing during the capture and the interrogation phase was almost unbearable. But I also knew that this was an investment in my training. My experiences in that camp would make me so much better prepared if one day I should encounter such a situation in a real war.

Moreover, I didn't want to stand out by complaining. I focused on behaving entirely like a Jaeger, reminding myself that I had to go through this punishment to truly call myself one.

And finally, I made it to the course's conclusion. 18 pounds skinnier after the three weeks of hardship, I was still pretty satisfied at being in the top 20 out of the 80 students who received such a special distinction.

Finally, I fully felt like a Jaeger. Despite my pride in passing the Combat Survival Course, I was already feeling a sort of disillusionment about my dream job. It was early in the year, 1992, and I'd only been a Jaeger for a few months.

Of course, it was an honor to be a part of this small and exclusive crowd. But it felt like our day-to-day life was pretty meaningless. I became increasingly aware of the fact that the Jaeger Corps had existed since 1961 and had never been sent to a real war zone. We never experienced anything operative, and in everyday life we mainly occupied our time with semi-military sports disciplines like pentathlons, triathlons, orientation runs, and skydiving. Other than that, we had our general physical training, and our exercises. We'd participate in special forces exercises abroad in Germany, England,

Belgium, Holland, and France, and they were often exciting and realistic, but during the Combat Survival Course I realized that my unit was not a particularly operative one.

I saw it very clearly when we were at a lecture with Andy McNab, who was involved in Operation Desert Storm in the first Gulf War against Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces in Kuwait. He later wrote the famous book *Bravo Zero Two* about his experiences. For me, the essence of being a professional soldier was in being operational. It was the core of a soldier's identity and eligibility.

It was only in these situations that our craft, our mental strength, and our character would ultimately be challenged. And I wanted to be challenged. I wanted to go on secret missions in enemy territories, in exotic, distant countries. I wanted to operate undercover, hidden by darkness, sneaking up on the target and blowing it to pieces. I wanted to try the most dangerous, the most exciting, and the most demanding things life had to offer. But it didn't look like any of that was going to happen anytime soon.

After 13 years of a focused and almost daily struggle to achieve my position, arriving at my goal wasn't at all like I hoped it would be. I felt cut off from the possibility of really moving mental boundaries.

It is very disappointing. Depressing. A major anticlimax. And it caused me to lose my drive and decide to pursue other challenges in life.

At that point, I had never considered any alternatives to the Jaeger Corps. I was tired of the military and was convinced that I never wanted to wear a uniform again, so I used my accumulated civilian education with full military pay to go to various business classes in the first half of 1993. I didn't really know what to use the education for, and it was an entirely new and unfamiliar situation for me not to have a clear goal.

I therefore decided to pursue my creative dreams instead. I bought a drum kit and a camera, the latter quickly leading to my becoming the assistant to an established photographer, and later, an independent photographer.

The photography went really well. I earned good money, but I was never satisfied my longing for foreign places. So early in 1995, I decided to pursue another old dream: to learn Spanish and live in South America. I was sure I would love the food, the climate, the mood, and the women. And so I set out. For a year and a half I lived and traveled around Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Bolivia, where I took photographs for the fashion magazine, *Elle*, various Danish and local magazines and newspapers.

I experienced lots of professional and personal challenges during that time. Among other things, I fell victim to an armed robbery, where they got away with my watch, a Rolex Submariner, that I had saved up for through a year's worth of hard work at a newsstand when I was a teenager. I was also

chased down the street with a loaded revolver by my girlfriend's morbidly jealous ex-boyfriend. To top it off, I spent my last money fixing the broken leg of a stray dog in Santiago.

In September of 1997, I returned home to Denmark and entered into the IT industry. For two and a half years I worked within sales and found the job interesting and challenging in the beginning. But I began to miss the tension and excitement I'd experienced in my daily life in South America and, to no small extent, in the military. So one day in March of 2000, on my way to the office, I decided to quit. I had no alternatives and no plans. It was an impulse decision: enter the building, write up my notice, print it out, hand it to my boss, and drive back home. From there, I turned to earning a living as a driveway paver in Copenhagen. But my coming fate was sealed when, only a couple of weeks later, I received a letter from the Danish Demining Group.

## Chapter Five: War's garbage man

I accepted the offer to become a program manager for the Danish Demining Group (DDG) in the Caucasus. Specifically, in Chechnya's neighboring republic of Ingushetia.

For 10 weeks during the spring and summer of 2000, a number of former Jaegers and I attended a course at The Army Engineer Regiment, where the Army, together with the DDG, trained me to become an expert in mine clearing and disposal of unexploded ordnance. I completed that course knowing how to handle a mine detector and recognizing the importance of the slow and extremely boring mine-detection process. I could tell the difference between all sorts of anti-tank mines, anti-personnel mines, grenades, bombs, rockets, and other ordnance, and most importantly, I knew how to destroy all of them. The course's instructors taught me everything I needed to become a war garbage man and help put an end to the Third World's huge mine problem.

Particularly cursed with landmines and unexploded ammunition was Afghanistan, some countries in Africa, parts of Asia, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. The DDG, as a Danish, humanitarian, non-governmental organization, had instituted demining programs in all these regions. Those countries have all been, or are still, active war zones, where mines have proven to be horrifically effective killing instruments not only against warring military entities, but also against the innocent civilian population and animals. The wars in these countries have also left unexploded grenades, aircraft bombs, and mortar bombs behind, often left in that state through technical errors or incorrect handling by soldiers, and every year they kill or severely injure tens of thousands of men, women, children, and animals.

In the Caucasus, northeast of Turkey and the Black Sea, where Europe meets the Middle East and Asia, the problem is indescribably large. The region consists of up to 50 different cultures divided into small republics that have fought in an endless stream of armed conflicts for the last 15 to 20 years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ethnic conflicts, war crimes, mafia crime, and terrorism are normal occurrences there. Many will remember the terrorist action against the "School Number 1" in the Chechen village of Beslan in September 2004. On the first day after summer vacation, about 20 Chechen and Islamist insurgents armed with Kalashnikovs, RPGs, and explosives, occupied the school of 900 students. A clumsy and chaotic hostage operation was conducted by the police, soldiers, and security forces, resulting in over 330 lost lives—sadly, over half of them children.

The Russian-Chechen conflict began when the tiny republic of Chechnya declared itself independent in 1991 after the Soviet collapse. For a decade, Russian troops and Chechen rebels fought bloody battles, which reduced the country to ruin, killing tens of thousands and wounding many more.

By the end of the year 2000, it was estimated that over one million mines had been planted in

the country as a result of the war. Keep in mind, less than one million people actually live in the country, which is only about the size of Delaware.

No other country in the world has had as many landmine victims as Chechnya. In the year 2002 alone, it was estimated that nearly 5700 people were killed or wounded by mines, almost 1000 of these were children. And onto that statistic, you can doubtless add a large number of wounded and dead animals.

The anti-personnel mines caused the most problems for the population, since the people still had to go on with their lives despite the fact the fields, roads, and trails they used each day were littered with explosives.

The children needed to go to school or fetch firewood for the family, the farmers and their cattle needed to go to the fields, and the women needed to go to the cities and markets. Alternatively, there was a life without bare necessities.

It would have been optimal if we could have just begin removing the mines, but in the year 2000, it was impossible to implement proper clearance given the ongoing battles between the Chechen rebels and the Russians, who had over 100,000 soldiers stationed in the country, primarily in and around Grozny, the capital. So instead, the DDG, in collaboration with Danish Church Aid and donations from the UN, the EU, DANIDA, a Swedish support agency named SIDA, and others, provided information on how the civilian population could avoid the mines as much as possible.

This was the program I was going to manage and develop from the neighboring republic of Ingushetia's capital city, Nazran. Ingushetia is the smallest and poorest of the republics in the Caucasus. It borders Chechnya to the west and is only about 1,400 square miles in size, with a population of less than half a million people. In addition to the population of Ingushetia, there are also several hundred thousand Chechen refugees in camps around the country. It was primarily those people that we were to inform about mines and unexploded ordnance.

My journey to Nazran began with a couple of nights in the big, cold Russian capital of Moscow, where I found out that most Muscovites certainly do not like the Caucasians. They consider them to be terrorists and criminals, partly because a large part of the Russian mafia traces its origins to the Caucasus. This only made me more excited for my next six months as a program manager. Plus, I was to be partnered up with another former Jaeger, a guy named Peter Correl. We'd passed the same demining course, and would be overseeing the program together.

Now, given the bad security situation in Ingushetia, it was a requirement of the DDG that we have a security setup. Four men from the local police were to be our bodyguards and ensure our safety when we went to or came from home, work, or when driving around the region and to the refugee

camps. Kidnapping was a particularly big problem in the area. Between 1996 and 1999, approximately 1300 people were abducted. Many were never returned—killed if the ransom was not paid. It is estimated that by 2009 there were about 500 people still held hostage in holes in the ground and dark, damp basements. The risk of getting kidnapped is especially high for Westerners, considering they are lucrative targets, commonly known as “walking money.” Many western journalists and aid workers have been kidnapped by criminal gangs or the local mafia. One of the most famous cases is that of Camilla Carr and her boyfriend Jon James, who traveled to the Chechen capital Grozny to open a rehabilitation center for children traumatized by the war. Three months after the arrival of the British couple, they were both kidnapped by Chechen rebels. Over the next 14 months, they were both tortured, and she was raped numerous times by her captors before they were both released on a ransom. Both the British and the Russian government reject the theory that either paid the ransom, and it is speculated that the London-resident Russian billionaire Boris Berezovsky paid the Chechen kidnappers.

It was this reality I was heading toward when, one late night in October of 2000, I boarded a Russian domestic flight from Moscow’s Domodedovo airport to Nazran. The airport was completely snowed in, so the plane was held back for an hour. When it had been given permission to take off, the Russian pilot came wobbling toward the cockpit—clearly wasted and wearing a big furry hat. This, unfortunately, confirmed my prejudices about domestic flights in Russia. It didn’t help that the cabin of the little Tupolev jet rattled and roared as we bounced along the runway, plastic bags filled with luggage falling out of the overhead compartments as large Russian women browsed through their colorful magazines.

Only a few days after my arrival, I already felt pretty well adapted to my new job. I outfitted my little office with a computer and a printer, and though I struggled to get the Internet connection up and running, the framework was in place. Now, there was only the small matter of making a humanitarian difference.

In the teacher’s room, adjacent to my office, I taught my 15 to 20 local employees.

They were all Chechens, mostly women aged 20 to 40 years, two men in their early twenties, and almost all of them had traumatic backgrounds due to the last ten years they’d spent fighting in their homeland.

They all lived in the surrounding refugee camps, and many of their husbands, wives, children, or parents had died or simply disappeared because of the war. But despite the situation, or perhaps because of it, they showed a great deal of spirit and morale in their work to publicize the danger of mines in the region.

By local standards, the job was very well paying, and the employees were very adamant about



being well equipped to teach their compatriots about the latest dangers of the region.

I contacted refugee camps, schools and other public agencies to coordinate teachings. We also set up small mobile teams of teachers we sent around the region for a week at a time. It was risky work. The teachers were often running around in areas where there were ongoing battles between Russians and Chechen rebels.

But the effort was a great success. The teachers reached out to areas where hardly anyone was informed about the dangers. They handed out pamphlets and leaflets, which they had written and laminated themselves, to the local children and their families.

Because of this success, we wanted more teachers. When word got out, we were immediately bombarded with requests from women, men and even some children who all claimed that they were just the one for the job. Peter and I almost got ourselves into trouble when our guards began insisting that their cousins or friends should have the job. Two of them even got quite aggressive, shouting at me when I told them we'd already found suitable candidates and suggesting that our decision might affect our safety. This was not the only reason why I kept an eye on these people, whom I was often forced to trust with my life.

Given the tense security situation and the high risk of getting kidnapped, it was impossible for me to travel alone outside of our house and office. The bodyguards became my constant companions, and frankly, I was not impressed. They seemed slow and unmotivated, and I simply could not trust them as security professionals. If Peter and I ever got into trouble, they would probably be more in the way than of any help, and they'd surely be the first to bail. But for the moment, they were just a burden that I had to live with.

The house we were living in was a fine villa located inside a fenced area containing newly built and completely identical houses accommodating the republic's elite. We actually lived next to the president, who sped off every morning in his armored Humvee, followed by a black car filled with his bodyguards.

The area was a major contrast to the small capital, Nazran, where the towers of worn-down mosques overshadowed the city; where only a few roads were paved and waste flowed through the streets; where cattle, fowl and wild dogs roamed freely. There were only a few shops near where we lived, but we had access to a large number of markets packed with fruits, vegetables, meat, flowers, and other daily necessities.

We shared the house with the Danish Refugee Council, which consisted of a diverse group of employees and residents. There was Kristof, who was Polish but spoke fluent Danish. With his long gray hair hanging down his back, he looked like a stubborn relic of the Woodstock generation. In his

mid-forties, he had been trained as an architect, married a Dane, and had been working in this industry for years. He was responsible for construction projects in the refugee camps. Despite his appearance, he was frank and direct, both privately and professionally, and I really liked him.

Then, there was Henrique, a nice, quite and polite Frenchman who handled the logistics of the refugee camps.

And finally, there was Kharon, who was employed by the local workforce's boss. He was a short, hotheaded Chechen, hardworking and very ambitious. He had dreams of going to Canada, where he planned to get another education and begin a new life with his beautiful wife and their child.

For me, the worst part about my restrictive, isolated life in the house was that I couldn't go running. To the great irritation and displeasure of the other residents, I would compensate for this by doing my training each night, running up and down the stairs from the basement to the first floor. But I convinced them that it was a necessity for me to stay in shape and stay sane, and so they accepted it. I also took some money out of my budget to buy some weights and a punching bag for boxing that I hung up in the basement.

Trips outside the house and outside the city were usually to refugee camps, where I assisted our teachers with their lessons and studied how the refugees received and processed the information.

The many thousands of refugees were a dispiriting collection of tortured and malnourished people who had lived in these camps for years. Many children were born there and knew nothing else but life in the camp, where tens of thousands of tents lay side by side in endless rows, separated by muddy paths and trails. Families of six to ten people lived crammed together in tents not larger than 60 square feet, heated by small gas burners in their centers and illuminated by only a few hanging light bulbs. They owned very few personal items, which typically included a few beds, a table, and a few pictures of their family—shedding a light on the life they once had.

Amongst others, I visited a family where the 10-year-old son had lost both arms and an eye when he was playing in a forest near his family farm. For the rest of his life, he would be completely dependent on his family, and wouldn't even be able to go to the toilet, or eat, or get dressed without them.

While visiting another family, I spoke with a father who had lost both his legs. While walking in a field with his cow, he came across a Russian anti-personnel mine. The cow died of its wounds, but he managed to drag himself home to his farm on the stumps that were left of his legs. Thanks to a foreign aid organization that specializes in giving prosthetics to mine victims, he could now walk with the help of crutches. In general, all the refugees were deeply dependent upon the UN and foreign aid organizations, such as the Danish Refugee Council, which set up camps such as the one I was visiting

and distributed food. Rice, flour and milk powder in daily rations barely kept the families alive.

And the situation outside the refugee camps wasn't any better. During our training process around the regions bordering Chechnya, we found that many Chechen families had sought refuge with family and friends in Ingushetia until the day they, perhaps, could return to their homes in Chechnya. These poor, sad people sat huddled around wooden stoves in tiny shacks in the cold winter.

One of these families invited me into their shack for a cup of chai. Although many children were present, this family had been one of the many deeply affected by the war in Chechnya. The mother sat with a stack of pictures in her lap, her eyes wet with tears, and held one up in front of me. It showed her brother and his girlfriend, both in their late teens. Two years earlier, they'd left the house together to go to work in the nearby village, but never came back home again. The family hadn't heard a word from them since, but they were certain that they'd been taken by the Russians and probably killed shortly after.

In the schools, where we held hour-long lectures about the dangers of mines, there was no heat or any other basic amenities. Schools were just wooden barracks where children had to share tables and the teacher had only his chalkboard and nothing else.

It was even more depressing to visit the hospitals in the border areas. We'd visit them as part of an agreement we had with the local UN department in Nazran to establish contact between relief organizations and help with providing prosthetics for mine victims. But these so-called hospitals were unspeakably dilapidated. They were all old and shabby buildings, often missing glass in the windows, the gaps instead covered with plastic. Their corridors were dark, void of any kind of light. The restrooms had feces smeared on the walls.

Patients lay in dirty beds with amputated limbs, emptily staring up at the ceiling. The nurses and doctors who cared for their patients did as well as they could with the modest amounts of medicine and the primitive equipment available. It was beyond me how any patient could survive a place like this. As a Jaeger I had lived under primitive and filthy conditions, and I knew how easily the body's immune system could be affected. Staying in a place like this was bound to kill you, if you weren't dying of your injury or disease already.

In late winter, I chose to take a trip to Chechnya's war-torn capital of Grozny. Grozny has more mines and unexploded ammunition than any other place in the entire Caucasus region. I wanted to contact some of the schools there, the ones that had defied the odds and were still up and running, to make agreements with them about teaching.

It was a risky situation. Battles between rebels and Russian forces were ongoing in the city, which was more or less completely destroyed by bombs and shot to pieces by Russian occupiers. It was

a regular day when the Russians would leave their bases and set up hundreds of checkpoints on the outskirts of the city, prepared to punish anyone who reminded them even the tiniest bit of a rebel. Meanwhile, rebels and civilians hid from Russian snipers and a steady stream of rocket and machine gun fire.

At nightfall, almost all of the 80,000 Russian soldiers would return to their bases. The rebels would then creep out, hidden by darkness, to place roadside bombs and mines in the city's streets and alleyways.

As a result of this covert warfare, 4700 Russian soldiers were killed in Chechnya during the three years between 1999 and 2002. The death toll of the Chechens really depends on who's counting. The Russians claim 45,000 died during the two Russian-Chechen wars since 1994, while Chechen sources, including the well-known exile leader Akhmed Zakayev, say that number is closer to 250,000 Chechens dead, and almost as many missing.

My bodyguards had to accompany me to Grozny of course, but they were not very excited about it. I doubted they would risk their lives to save me, and it suited me just fine when they insisted on getting reinforcements from a Russian Special Forces unit in order to feel more secure. I then found myself wearing a bulletproof vest in the back seat of an SUV, in the company of three large, quiet Russians with machine guns, while my own bodyguards kept their distance in their own car behind us.

The drive from Nazran to Grozny took a couple of hours, and had Chechnya not been a warzone, the landscape would actually be quite beautiful. Fields, streams, forests, and the magnificent mountain range to the south, where the Elbrus—18,510 feet tall—towered over them all.

But it had also been heavily bombed, and I noticed small red signs with skulls on them on the fences along the fields. They indicated mines. In one field, I spotted the carcass of a cow that had its entire back blown off. Later, I was deeply saddened by the image of two dogs, completely ripped apart, lying at the edge of a small road.

We were constantly stopped by Russian checkpoints, where BMP infantry fighting vehicles sat parked behind concrete walls, the Russian soldiers controlling all the traffic on the road.

As we approached Grozny, we had just passed another checkpoint when a BMP opened fire with its 7.62 mm machine gun. We couldn't see what the shooter was aiming for, but the Russian Special Forces soldier behind the wheel of my vehicle wisely accelerated away from the checkpoint at high speed.

After that, we drove toward the city center, and it was a shocking vision that we encountered. The city looked much worse than I could have ever imagined, and it was a surreal sight of misery and destitution. Never has the term ghost town been more applicable. All the houses, buildings, streets, and

landmarks had been completely destroyed by the fighting, and the town seemed deserted. I saw a few expressionless people scurrying through the streets with shopping bags from the small markets that kept the people alive.

Even the Russian soldiers, leaning against their armored vehicles in a myriad of different uniforms, seemed influenced by the thoroughly depressing atmosphere. They didn't seem as disciplined and tense as one might think they would be in the midst of a warzone. They appeared sloppy and apathetic.

“This center!”

We parked at the edge of a large public square, and for the first time on the whole trip, the Russian Special Forces soldier with the highest rank said something to me. It appeared that we were in the center of the city now, and we could disembark. The other two soldiers immediately positioned themselves with their PKM machine guns pointing in opposite directions while my own bodyguards stood by their own car, keeping a safe distance from the rest of us and looking kind of uneasy. One of them had the courage to come up to me and ask if he can take a picture. I let him do it.

The Russian Special Forces soldiers were anxious and uneasy about our position, so we quickly got back into our cars and drove toward the schools that I came to visit.

After a lot of detours, we finally arrived at the first school and were greeted by an elderly, gray-haired and frail woman—some kind of principal at the school. She was speechless at my arrival, and clearly a little suspicious. Who was this stranger, with his soldiers and machine guns, popping up out of the blue and offering help? Through a translator, I explained to her what my goals were, and she lit up at the idea of me teaching the 100 pupils that attended her school. I agreed with her on the number of my teachers that would do this. But I repeatedly emphasized that the teaching would only be conducted on the agreed upon dates assuming everything went as planned. This was how things were done in a war situation and she was more than accustomed to it. She thanked me for my visit and we left.

It was only a couple of hours until nightfall. The three silent Russians let me know that it was time to drive back to Ingushetia. We pulled the car around, once again passing through multiple Russian army checkpoints. The troops on guard seemed happier, more uplifted, this time. The Special Forces soldier who was driving our car turned around and gave me a big smile, exposing a gold tooth, and made the motion of taking a drink. The checkpoint guards were all drunk.

When we left the ghost town, I looked back and hoped I would never have to go back to such a depressing place again.

In the early spring, we continued working in the refugee camps, the schools, and other official institutions. Peter and I felt good about our work, and genuinely believed we were making a difference.

Actually, it was going so well, we appointed a specially assigned officer, Elena, to take over our roles since we would be going home shortly.

Before we left, though, we had to live through another Caucasian test. Or rather, Peter had to. One morning, he woke up in the DDG-house with half of his face paralyzed and without feeling.

He looked terrible. We called the local doctor, who arrived in an old ambulance that reminded me of a hearse—the red lamp on top going slower than the second hand of my watch. A little man wearing a dirty white coat and a gigantic fur hat entered the living room. All his visible teeth were golden, and he quickly diagnoses Peter with something that I'd never heard of. He got out a needle the size of a kitchen knife from his bag and rammed it into the Peter's buttocks, putting him out like a light. The Ingush health system was not very helpful, so the next day I flew home with Peter. There, he was diagnosed with something called Bell's palsy, a problem with the nerves of the face caused by a latent infection of a herpes virus. I was glad that we acted so quickly and went home, since it turned out that the correct treatment had to be administered within 72 hours or the paralysis could stay for a longer term. As it was, Peter recovered after only a few weeks.

I went back to Ingushetia immediately and oversaw the transfer of the program to Elena over the course of a couple of weeks. She was as happy as a clam about her new position as program manager. I was pretty happy about being done with that part of the world, and was ready to go home to enjoy the Danish spring. Jogging through the parks of Copenhagen. Being able to move where I wanted, when I wanted to. And last but not least, my reunion with Danish women—clad in their skimpy springtime outfits—and the taste of a cold beer.

My pleasant spring at home was cut short when the Danish Demining Group offered me yet another job, this time with their demining operations in Afghanistan. I happily said yes.

## Chapter Six: The Middle Ages in 2001

As I exited the British Airways Boeing 777 at Islamabad International Airport in Pakistan, the hot and humid night air hit me like a brick wall. It was April of 2001, and I was at my first stop en route to Afghanistan.

A long and exhausting trip with noisy and irritating passengers had left me tired, and I was delighted to finally get to bed. After waiting on my luggage to arrive for an hour after I landed, I pushed myself through the crowd of yelling taxi drivers, smelling money at the sight of a Westerner. I didn't need a cab. I was picked up by the DDG's driver, Hasheem, a small man with a round face and mustache, who kindly welcomed me and heaved my luggage into the Office's brand new Mazda.

On our way through town, heading toward the DDG headquarters situated in the city's northern sector F-6—a fashionable residential area with multiple embassies—we passed the Marriott Hotel. It was lit up and looked peaceful. Hasheem praised their buffet. I also noted the contours of the large Faisal mosque against the night sky. It seemed gloomy and made me think about what might await me in a few days in Afghanistan. I was excited to face the new challenge. My time in the Caucasus had been intense, but Afghanistan, which I had only read or heard about, sounded like an even more violent place in need of help.

Afghanistan has always been a battleground for the forces of Central Asia. Warfare is a part of Afghan culture, whether it's against a rival clan or imperialist forces such as Persia, Great Britain, or, speaking of the country's more recent history, the Soviet Union.

In April 1978, the Afghan Communist Party violently assumed power of the country and named it the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The communists introduced reforms allowing women to vote, prohibiting forced marriages, and replacing Islamic laws with secular, Marxist laws. Many Afghans considered the government's values infected with Western values and were furious that the traditional Islamic virtues had been abandoned. As a result, Afghans fled by the thousands from cities into the mountains to join the Islamic Resistance Movement, the mujahedin, which had declared jihad—holy war—against the communist government.

The Soviet Union, naturally, didn't like this at all. When Soviet paratroopers landed in Kabul during Christmas of 1979, they claimed they'd been invited by the Afghan government.

Their mission had been to support the government in the fight against the mujahedin, who were fighting against the government throughout the entire country. In the following years, a brutal war unfolded, and the Soviets found the mujahedin to be skilled and tough opponents. Despite the Russians' use of planes, helicopters, tanks, napalm, and chemical weapons, the mujahedin still

managed to control about 75 percent of Afghanistan in 1982.

Given their resistance to the Soviet regime, the Afghan mujahedin were supported, both financially and materially, by the U.S. CIA and the Pakistani mujahedin. Among other things, they were given Stinger missiles, which became crucial in the fight against the Russian HIND helicopters. Saudi Arabia also supported the rebels financially, given their shared Muslim faith. But possibly the most infamous sponsor of the Afghan mujahedin was a wealthy militant leader named Osama bin Laden. He sent money and weapons, with support from the U.S., to his fighting Muslim brothers. He went on to found al-Qaida in 1988 in order to expand the fight against the Soviet Union to a worldwide level.

In February of 1989, the Russians, frustrated by their lack of success in overcoming the Muslim fundamentalists in the country, withdrew their forces from Afghanistan and left the country with hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of landmines, and a smoldering civil war between local warlords. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed in 1992, but the war continued for another four years, a new Islamic fundamentalist group rising to prominence: the Taliban. Led by one of the veterans of the war against the Russians, Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban were comprised of devout and ascetic warriors, pure in their faith and even more popular with the local population than the unruly mujahedin. The popularity of the Taliban attracted more troops to their cause, helping them to win the civil war in 1996—forcing other warlords to sign a peace treaty.

Shortly after the Taliban seized power of the country, they introduced Islamic law in its strictest and most puritanical form. The punishment for theft was severing one or both of the accused's hands. It wasn't uncommon for someone to be publicly stoned for infidelity, or hanged for saying anything unfavorable about the Taliban.

It was illegal to wear white socks, as white was the color of the Taliban flag. All forms of television, pictures, and music were banned. Girls' schools were closed, and women were not allowed to work, pursue an education, or move outside of their home without their husband or without being dressed in a baby blue burqa, which covered even their faces and eyes. Women were often refused hospital treatment to prevent contact with male doctors. Children were no longer allowed to play with kites, and it was illegal for men not to have a beard of a certain length.

Despite all these bizarre and inhumane changes, the Taliban takeover was still positively received by many Afghans. Finally, someone could create law and order in this war-torn country. Only in the northeast did the Taliban meet opposition—the Northern Alliance. Internationally, the Taliban was under pressure. Only three countries actually recognized them as a legitimate government: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The rest of the world deeply criticized the



Taliban's form of government, and the U.S. believed they were hosting training camps for Islamic terrorists. One of these camps was run by Osama bin Laden, who the U.S. accused of being a major force behind the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, which killed 224 people and injured 5000.

It was this country and these rulers that I, In April 2001, was to be acquainted with. I was quite alarmed at the prospect of meeting the Taliban, which represented an outlook that could hardly be more distant and unreal for a Dane. I would now have to adjust to living in a fundamentalist dictatorship, based on the most extreme interpretations of Islam. But I remained hopeful. Especially after waking up in the DDG villa to a nice breakfast and the company of my good old Jaeger friend, Johan Færch. Johan stood out on our first day of the Jaeger Corps patrol course in 1990. Partially because he was the only one wearing a navy blue sailor's uniform amongst the other 90 soldiers in army green camouflage uniforms, and partly because he answered with a loud and clear sailor greeting to the morning's roll call. I became best friends with this outstanding Jaeger; we were virtually inseparable for several years. It was reassuring to know Johan would be with me in the beginning of my time in such unfamiliar surroundings. He had worked as a technical advisor in DG's demining program in Afghanistan for half a year, but didn't want to be away from his wife and little son, so he decided to return to Denmark. I'd be the one to replace him, and for the moment, he would assign me demining tasks and introduce me to our Afghan workforce.

My journey into Afghanistan was one Johan had experienced many times. We chose to drive in. Although there weren't any commercial flights into the country due to terror threats and a very rundown airport in Kabul, the UN flew weekly into and out of the capital city. But the seats were very limited and very expensive, and besides, how can you beat the thrill of a ten-hour road trip into one of the most remote regions on the planet.

Johan knew from experience that this trip could take a lot out of the vehicle and the man behind the wheel, but fortunately, he also knew how best to pack and prepare the car. We undergirded our tools, several spare tires, extra shock absorbers, the long-range high-frequency radio, extra fuel, water, food, and our baggage. And even though our Land Cruiser was only half a year old, it appeared to be a lot older—worn with scratches and dents from previous trips between Islamabad and Kabul.

Our trip commenced with us heading to the northeast, through the Pakistani city of Peshawar, which borders the vast, lawless territory known as the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas. A region that runs along the Afghan mountains, the Tribal Areas were allegedly under the control of the Pakistani government, but lawlessness, particularly smuggling, crime, and copy-production of every

known weapon, was still the daily bread of the people living there.

The road to Peshawar was paved, the landscape green with lush, cultivated fields. But as we approached the Khyber Pass, the quality of the road got worse and the landscape more barren. When we hit the last 30 miles of the pass, entering the border town of Torkham, the road became little more than a narrow, winding gravel road, where the traffic became very confusing. Here we were, driving a right-handed Land Cruiser in Pakistan, where they drive on the left side of the road. But since most of the traffic was coming from Afghanistan, where you drive on the right-hand side, there was little consensus about who should drive where. Cars, motorcycles, buses, trucks, and Pakistani army vehicles passed by in a crazed blur, honking from both sides and in both directions of the road. Especially the drivers of worn, overloaded, and colorfully decorated Pakistani trucks—often old English Bedfords called Jingletrucks—drove like maniacs, without any apparent fear of death.

When we finally arrived in Torkham, it seemed more like a border post than a real city. Only a gate on the road demarcated the border. I had experienced disorganized bureaucracy before in Russia and the Caucasus, but this place was an unreasonable example of a lack of organization, almost a comical chaos. There was a raging crowd surrounding the closed border gate, next to crooked lines made up of hundreds of cars. They were all shouting and screaming, everyone insisting they were the ones who should be let through. Meanwhile, the two Pakistani policemen at the gate struck the most over-zealous of the crowd with their batons.

I watched this scene in disbelief, and was suddenly very happy that Johan had been through this before. He parked the car at the side of the road, took his passport and a fistful of dollars out of the glove box, and asked me to follow. We pushed through the crowd toward a small brick house near the gate, marked with a sign that read 'passport office'. Since we were the only white faces inside the crowd, we were greeted with some curious glances. But Johan didn't hesitate a second, walking past the line of people and straight up to the small wooden table where we were going to get our passports stamped.

The man sitting behind the table stood out from the hectic mass of people around him. He was dressed in a long black robe, a scarf tied around his head, and he radiated a kind of calm self-confidence—an attitude that really didn't fit into our surroundings. As we approached, he sat with his head bent over a stack of papers on the table. Johan slid him our passports with some dollar bills tucked inside. At first, he didn't even notice us. But after a minute or so, he swept his papers aside and looked up at us. A pair of expressionless, almost black eyes stared up at us from a face partially covered in a long, black, carefully groomed beard. He stared at my clean-shaven face with evident suspicion. Finally, he took our passports, studying them carefully, put the dollar bills into his desk drawer, and

finally stamped and signed the passports—placing them in front of us without a second glance.

Johan muttered something angry on the way back to the Land Cruiser, and I felt once again reassured by his experience with this type of crowd. He got into the car, honked the horn, and completely unaffectedly, drives by the cows and the angry mob—the latter kicking and beating the car—until we were waved through the gate to Afghanistan.

From there, our first stop was Jalalabad—the second largest city in eastern Afghanistan and a trade center for paper manufacturing and agricultural products such as oranges, rice, and sugar. The road there was terrible. It would be an exaggeration to call it a gravel road. The potholes in the street were deep enough to swallow a tire to the axle. Here and there a couple of old Toyotas would pass us, all stuffed with eight or more people inside, along with furniture, luggage, and pets on the roof.

Driving in Afghanistan required an enormous amount of concentration, so Johan and I would only exchange the most necessary information during our transit, which suited me just fine. I wanted to enjoy the country's beautiful landscape. We passed babbling rivers in valleys surrounded by massive waterfalls spilling over large, flat plains, and green, fertile fields surrounding small towns.

After passing through Jalalabad, the road began to elevate steadily, en route to Kabul, situated at an elevation of 3600 feet. Johan expertly steered the Land Cruiser around the traffic coming toward us, which we could only barely pass given the cliff wall on one side and the abyss on the other. The number of Taliban checkpoints rose as we approached Kabul. At these checkpoints, attentive black-clad men with scarves wrapped around their heads, cradling their preferred weapon—the AK-47—sat in the back of Toyota pickup trucks. Those trucks were equipped with old Russian 14.5 mm machine guns, which the Taliban pointed directly at the line of waiting cars. Many of the guards were young guys, with thin faces and sad excuses for beards on their chins.

At one checkpoint, we were stopped. Since we were the only Westerners out of several hundred waiting people, we became the center of everyone's attention. It was clear that the guards were trained to hate us—the Western infidels. We were ordered out of the Land Cruiser, which was then searched for possible immoral and unlawful items such as music, perfume, alcohol, or nudey-magazines.

An elderly, toothless Taliban, who seemed to be in charge at this particular checkpoint, took hold of my luggage and began to rummage through my personal belongings with his dirty, blackened hands. He clearly hoped to find something he could confiscate—probably to sell later. But there was nothing to see. He threw our passports onto the front seat and wordlessly went back to his people by the boom barrier. He ordered it to be raised, and we passed through, continuing the last 12 miles along the rocky road to Kabul.

The road was situated slightly higher than the city, so the view that we encountered as we

approached was just magnificent. Kabul appeared much bigger than I had expected. Over two million inhabitants and their houses filled up the entire plateau between the mountains surrounding the city. The suburbs, made up of small clay houses and depressing concrete apartment blocks built by the Russians in the 80s, stretched up along the hillsides. Most of the houses were decrepit and without windows or doors, and they seemed empty and deserted. Only the clotheslines between windows and a few dirty children running about represented signs of life.

The sight of the city center in Kabul was not much more uplifting. In the 70s, this had been a relatively modern city. There were restaurants, cafes, trams, movie theaters, and situated around the swimming pool of the popular hotel of the time—the Hotel Intercontinental—the women lay tanning in their bikinis. The war and the Taliban had, sadly, destroyed and torn apart the city, turning back its evolution. Now, the Afghan people have a life expectancy of a measly 46 years, and only 36 percent of those over 15 can read and write.

The road was only paved in the center of the city, and the Taliban's government buildings were somewhat maintained. Otherwise, almost all other roads and buildings showed damage. The vast majority of the buildings had bullet holes and looked abandoned. A large part of the city was completely without basic necessities such as water, electricity, sewage systems, or telephone lines.

There was a stench of urine, feces, and rotten waste in the streets, and several times I'd see haggard men crouching down and eating garbage straight from the street while cars, motorbikes, and people passed close by. Barely clothed children sat alone in the middle of the street, begging for help. Men pulled small carts to the local market, where anything they could scrounge was sold—all part of their daily struggle for survival.

Sheep and goat heads lay in wheelbarrows in the burning sun, tossed in with other kinds of meat, watermelons, scrap iron, wood, and used tires. It was a disgusting mess. A single bitch, with dangling teats and visible ribs hopped down the street on three legs.

There were no women at all in the street, but there were loads of patrolling Taliban in pickups, like the long arm of the law, ready to strike anyone behaving conspicuously.

We'd been traveling for about 10 hours, but I felt like I had traveled back in time at least a few hundred centuries. The country was quintessentially medieval in the year 2001. As we approached a large roundabout, my medieval presumption became reality. I spotted a human body hanging from a lamppost. His dark and bloodshot eyes stared at me lifelessly from a chalk-white face. Hands tied behind his back, the body dangled from the noose that took away his last breath. There was a group of young Taliban standing close by and laughing. They seemed to be admiring their work as if it were a trophy after a successful hunt. Others just passed by the lamppost without even noticing the hanging

corpse, just talking and smiling as if he wasn't even there. It must have been a fairly common sight in this city.

"Welcome to Afghanistan," Johan said, following my stare.

A short time later, we arrived at the former embassy district of Wasir Akbar Khan, where the DDG's house was located. It was clear that the district was once very wealthy, with its old European-style mansions featuring columns, archways, and park-like gardens. Many had become decrepit and the gardens had dried up, but there were a few villas with green lawns and fruit trees. The DDG house was like that. It was a large, white-brick house with three floors, surrounded by a six-foot-tall wall and a terrace in front of the house with a fine view of the garden and the gardener inside it, sowing grass, planting flowers, and tending apple and orange trees.

The DDG was represented here because Afghanistan was one of the world's most mine-infested countries. In the 10 years that the Russians had military forces in the country, they'd created defensive positions, fortifications, and bases around cities and throughout the country. Around all of these military installations, they buried anti-personnel mines and anti-tank mines. In addition to that, they also left behind large quantities of grenades, rockets, and bombs that either weren't used or didn't explode as intended. The ensuing civil war had only made the mine problem worse, and it is still today a huge problem for the typical Afghan and his family. Just as I saw in Chechnya, men, women, and children were continuously killed or severely injured by those explosives. According to the records, between 250 and 300 mine accidents happened each month in Afghanistan. I can't imagine how many cases never made it to the records.

In 2001, there were about 7000 minesweepers in Afghanistan, contributing immensely to the cleanup efforts. All of them came of out voluntary organizations or the UN, which, with state funds, employs and trains local Afghans to learn the hard and dangerous work of mine disposal. The DDG had been represented for three years as a part of the fleet comprising war's garbage men.

Immediately after arriving, Johan and I sat down on the terrace, next to an empty swimming pool, with our Swedish boss, Fredrik. We talked about my mission. There were only a few days left before Johan took the next UN flight home and left me in charge of the entire demining operation. We agreed that I should go and see the minefield the following day; it was located about half an hour from our villa.

It was just past 7 p.m. The darkness had settled over the city, and suddenly, everything had fallen very quiet. I couldn't hear a single car, bus, or truck on the usually busy road outside the house. Only the faint sound of barking dogs, roaming for food. Fredrik told me that this had been happening since the Taliban imposed a curfew. All traffic outside the home after seven o'clock was a serious

offense, and would be severely punished. Perhaps that was the crime the poor fellow on the lamppost was guilty of? Despite thinking about the dangling corpse, I still had a ravenous appetite for the food our Afghan chef prepared. I also drank a smuggled American beer before making my way to my room on the first floor and throwing myself on the bed—dead tired after the long day's drive. I fell asleep fast despite the sounds of dogs barking, Taliban pickups patrolling the streets, and the voice from the speaker of the Wazir Akbar Kahn mosque only 150 feet down the street.

The next morning, on the way to the minefield, we drove through Kabul's southern district. Virtually all the buildings were in ruins. The formerly amazing presidential palace had been pierced by anti-tank grenades and was missing almost the entire roof, but two men were up there, crawling around and patching it up with small tin plates.

My assigned minefield was located in the hills south of Kabul. This was where the Russians had set up fighting positions to defend the city against attacks from the south. The field spread out over an area the size of five soccer fields and was made up of approximately 20 percent anti-tank mines, 80 percent anti-personnel mines. There were six demining teams, 150 men in total, working eight hours a day, six days a week. Each team of 25 had an Afghan leader. Arriving on the field, one of these team leaders respectfully introduced all his people to me. I scanned the sweaty and tired faces as Johan introduced me as his replacement. Most of them just looked curiously at this new, unbearded superior, but some of the younger ones got a little jumpy and nervous. We foreigners often seemed very important to them, representing a world they only held vague ideas about.

The least humble of the lot was our Afghan doctor, Dr. Koshan, who was always onsite in case any accidents were to happen. Upon our arrival, we found him sprawled across a stretcher in our ambulance. He sat up abruptly when Johan opened the door with a jerk. The big man got up on his feet, stepped out into the sunlight with squinty eyes, and stuck out his meaty fist toward me. His hands were humongous, with fingers as thick as sausages and his mouth filled with an abnormal amount of teeth.

Being a deminer was very structured and strenuous work, especially in the boiling Afghan heat. And it was dangerous work. Deadly.

This was how it typically went: Each team got an area of 150x150 feet. They'd mark the edges with red painted stones on the side facing the minefield, white stones on the side facing harmless territory. Then, each deminer got assigned a path of about three feet in width. He'd wear a protective suit of Kevlar on his body and a helmet with a visor in front of his face as he worked with his mine detector. All oscillations were marked with a red wooden block. After this, the deminer would stick his long, pointy knife into the ground at an angle of 30 degrees, inch by inch. He had to be extra careful when operating close to the red blocks, using small rakes and shovels to remove all the soil around the

mine. The process must be done very gently. Some mines can be set off by as little as 10 pounds, and they are big enough to injure the deminer severely, even kill him if he is unlucky.

After a mine was detected, it would be marked with a peg and a red strip of plastic. Then, the deminer would close down his path and continue somewhere else. Approximately an hour before the day was over, all demining work would stop. Directional charges would be placed over the mines, they'd be interconnected, and then blown up all at once. That was the most fun part of the work, and usually the superior took care of it. That day, Johan and I did it together. We threaded the detonation cord between that day's catch of mines, put the detonators in place, and told everyone to seek shelter in the bunker before giving the signal for the explosion, yelling "fire in the hole," and pressing the button. A deep and hollow crash shook the sand off of the sides of the bunker, and Afghanistan was now a little safer and more passable.

Johan and I celebrated my first explosion in Afghanistan with some exhausting run training, going up and down the 2-mile-long gravel road through the thin air next to the minefield. We were both addicted to training, but runners were frowned upon in Kabul. Even out in this desolate area, we had to wear shirts and long pants. To show your belly and bare legs was sinful according to the Taliban, and they had eyes everywhere in order to make sure their medieval laws were respected.

## Chapter Seven: Surrounded by Taliban

I was beginning to feel at home in my new job and the new surroundings in Kabul. The first few weeks had been intense, with new tasks and partners I had to get to know. I also spent a lot of time writing reports for our financial sponsors: the EU and others. I filled out procedures so they were consistent with the overall framework of the UN's demining program.

I'd also gotten to know our staff. In addition to the gardener and the cook, we also had a maid in the DDG-villa, but it was a man—women weren't allowed to work. We had half a dozen Afghans employed as managers, responsible for about 250 locals who were working in small mobile teams as Explosive Ordnance Disposal-teams (EOD), dealing with unexploded ordnance in the area. Additionally, we had medical teams and mechanics for our 20 vehicles.

It was almost a workday, so I decided to drive up to the minefield to gain a better sense of the conditions.

But first, I had an errand to run. My boss, Fredrik, informed me that morning—with a smirk on his face—that I had to take a driver's license test at the Taliban Ministry of Transport. I was being called in to take a theoretical test, which I needed to pass in order to be allowed to move through the Afghan infrastructure by myself. I entered the Ministry a bit skeptically, and was referred to the office responsible for the tests and driver's licenses. I knocked. No answer. So I entered.

The room was dark and dusty. A tiny window in the back only lit up the room very slightly. Behind a huge desk, I saw a short old man with a huge white beard. His wrinkled, crooked hands were folded in front of him on the table. He looked at me with a solemn face, and his boyish assistant tried to do the same. They both welcomed me with a nod, and the old man whispered something into the ear of the assistant. The younger official eagerly hurried over to a wall, where a large map showing a very vague road system stood displayed. Then, the old man flipped a switch behind the table and the board lit up. I still had to strain my eyes to see the details. The boy trotted back to his boss, who whispered another message in his ear. He hurried back to the map, pointed to a roundabout, and asked me in almost incomprehensible English, "What you do here?"

I was a bit puzzled by the question, but answered that if there was a traffic cop in the roundabout, I'd wait for his instructions. If the roundabout was unattended, I would take the ongoing traffic into account and drive when appropriate.

The boy looked up at the ceiling as if really reflecting my in-depth answer, and then ran over to the old guy who looked like he was going to explode out of sheer curiosity. They whispered back and forth for a while, after which the old guy flashed me a smile, revealing only one single tooth in his



mouth. He pressed a button behind the desk and a green bulb over the desk lit up.

It seemed like my answer was satisfactory. They whispered again and the boy ran back to the blackboard, presenting me with another traffic situation. This whole procedure was repeated, and another green bulb lit up. But this time the old man also gave me a handshake.

I had passed my driver's test.

Afterwards, I drove up to the minefield, equipped with my new driver's license. Upon my arrival, I informed one of the team leaders of my errand and where I'd been so he'd know I didn't consider myself exempt from responsibility or superior to the Afghan deminers. I put on the uncomfortable, thirty-pound-heavy Kevlar vest, helmet, and visor, and then grabbed a minesweeper. There was a vacant path in the part of the field closest to the vehicles, so I chose to start there.

After an hour, my visor had fogged up, I was dripping with sweat, my knees were sore, and my neck felt like it was melting under the burning sun. I thought about our workers that were here eight hours a day, six days a week, and decided that I couldn't take a break yet. Instead, I took a sip of water and continued the slow and mentally exhausting process. After some time, my sweeper indicated metal in the ground. It was most likely a mine. Now, there couldn't be any sudden, uncontrolled movements. I slowly scrubbed away the hard soil, which crumbled into little hard lumps. There it was. I caught a glimpse of the brown Bakelite shell of the mine about two inches below the surface. I brushed the loose soil away with my fingers and removed a stone lying next to the mine. I saw that it was a Russian PMN-personnel mine. It was round, had a diameter of five inches, a trigger pressure of 12,8 pounds, and contained just over 200 grams of explosives. This was enough to kill a child. Wearing my Kevlar vest and my visor, I could be lucky and only lose a hand or part of my arm if it decided to go off. We couldn't work with gloves since they complicated the delicate work.

I scraped away the surrounding soil and rocks so that the mine was completely exposed. Even though it had been lying here for years, the brown Bakelite shell still glistened in the sun. The mine was completely intact and ready to injure or kill. I slowly crawled backwards out of my path to find a peg with a red strip on it.

Seconds later, I heard a loud bang followed by a shrill scream. I looked up from my path and toward the sound to see a cloud of sand and dust. At the foot of the cloud, I saw a deminer standing half upright. He staggered back slowly as his screams turned into wailing moans.

I quickly crawled out of my path, put down my mine detector, ripped off my visor, and ran over to him. More deminers of the neighboring paths began dragging him into a safer zone. His left hand was just a bloody mess of flesh and bones, and his face had been badly burned, but otherwise it looked as though both the visor and the vest had served their purposes.

Dr. Koshan came running up, breathing heavily, surrounded by his assistants. He shouted a lot of orders in Pashto and seemed to know exactly what to do. He quickly stabilized the wounded man, gave him a shot of morphine, and put him on an IV. Four deminers were ordered to put him on the stretcher and carry him to our ambulance, and within a couple of minutes, the ambulance rushed off with a flashing blue light and a siren on its way to a UN-operated hospital in Kabul.

Most days, Dr. Koshan would just lie around on the stretcher in the ambulance. That day, he really earned his wages. I realized that he did his job well, and the unfortunate deminer, because Koshan was so quick to stabilize him and get him to a care facility promptly, had escaped with his life. His hand, I later learned, required amputation, and a small shrapnel fragment had pierced his right lung where the Kevlar vest didn't protect. But he would live and would get paid a hefty amount from the insurance that covered all our deminer. In his case, though it seems like a small amount by Western standards, was \$4,500. For most Afghans, this was equal to many years' wages.

Unfortunately, this insurance policy came with a little backlash as well, as some deminers would actually try to figure out how they, too, could get a payout, as crazy as that may sound. We saw some examples where it looked as though the deminers had deliberately gotten a hand, an arm, or a leg blown off to support their families for several years. I had even heard of a case where a deminer deliberately got himself killed on the minefield to receive the maximum insurance payment of \$20,000.

Subsequent investigations showed that the accident I'd witnessed had been brought on by a Russian PMN, just like the one I had uncovered. Our studies also showed that rainfall over many winters had the tendency to cause the mines to shift in the ground, and some injured sweepers—this one included—might have stuck their forks directly into the pressure plate on the surface of the mine, thinking they were digging into the mine's side.

After this rather rough experience, I was tired and wanted to go home to the DDG-house and enjoy a cold beer on the terrace with Fredrik. I packed up my equipment and drove along the small dirt road from the minefield to the Taliban checkpoint just around the corner. We always slowed down before we got there so the two older Taliban officers wouldn't get surprised. But apparently, they still were this particular afternoon. My window was rolled down, and I could clearly hear the characteristic sounds of automatic weapons. I hit the brakes and threw myself out of the door, into a ditch beside the car. I stayed here for a moment and then sought shelter behind a rock where I could overlook the checkpoint about 600 feet down the road. One of the guards met my eyes. He stood there with a grin, waving with his one hand and his AK-47 in the other as if everything was in perfect order. I was confident that he knew who I was because he knew of our work in the minefields, and my Land Cruiser was easily recognizable with its long antenna. Maybe he just wanted something exciting to happen that

day.

First, it'd been the ridiculous charade at the Ministry of Traffic, followed by the exhausting mine sweeping in the hot sun, the dramatic accident in the minefield, and finally, the checkpoint shooting.

What a shitty day.

Undeterred, we continued our demining work during the summer of 2001. Besides working in the minefield, we also took care of a great deal of unexploded ordnance lying around in other parts of Kabul and in surrounding provinces. We had mobile EOD-teams, each consisting of three vehicles and 10-12 men who drove around and blew up UXO we often found on the ground where there used to be ammunition caches and defense posts. Areas that were used by women and children were our main focus. These were schools, villages, and areas where the villagers would go to fetch water. The problem was, many of the locals simply didn't know that the remaining grenades and rockets were dangerous. To our horror, we would sometimes see children and even adults carrying around the deadly munitions that could explode at any given time.

My Swedish colleague Rasmus managed the EOD service very competently, assisted by a legend in the field of munitions disposal, the former British army EOD specialist Peter Le Soirre, whom we hired as a consultant. At this point, Peter was well into his fifties and a millionaire, but he didn't seem to care about anything but mines and unexploded ordnance. He would even spend the few vacations he'd take diving after ammunition under the sea. But even someone so experienced can have bad days in this business, and he had one such day at our office. He was sitting in his chair, investigating a Chinese hand grenade when it suddenly began hissing and whistling at him. He only managed to throw it a few feet into the room before it exploded. Peter was struck with a large amount of metal shrapnel across his entire body and face, and was immediately taken to a local hospital. He developed gangrene and was then taken to a military hospital in Kabul, which ensured he would recover completely.

One afternoon, the UN asked Rasmus to check on an UXO-like object on the outskirts of town close to the royal palace, and I went with him. We packed up the car, drove there, and set about inspecting the area where a round object stuck out of the ground. It looked a whole lot like an unexploded anti-tank mine. Soon, there was a crowd of hundreds of locals around us and it was virtually impossible to keep them at a safe distance. We kept trying to explain to them that the object could potentially be very dangerous, and it would be best if they stood back at least a little bit.

Wearing our safety gear, we slowly uncovered the object and were extra careful to check that there was no booby-trap that would trip if we removed the large mine. For two hours, we dug nervously with our little shovels, uncovering it bit by bit. I looked up and noticed a bunch of lampposts nearby that obviously weren't working. I saw that all the posts had large, round lamps mounted to their tops except the one that was right above where we were digging. It dawned on me that we were digging up a lamp. We removed it from the soil completely and showed it to the locals who seemed very impressed, even though we didn't really feel like the big rescuers that day.

That changed on a Friday, our weekly day off, when Rasmus told me that he'd heard from a colleague in another organization that they'd found a litter of puppies running around in an abandoned house in the northern part of town. He thought that it would be nice to have a dog in the villa to make the often lonely and isolated days a bit livelier, and he insisted that we go and investigate.

I was a bit skeptical. I thought about what would happen if we, or our colleagues, were forced to leave Afghanistan in haste. Who would take care of the dog, then? Under no circumstances should it be left alone after having become accustomed to human love and care. The Taliban would probably not take loving care of it. Only very few people in the Muslim world keep a dog out of love, since, according to Islamic doctrine, dogs are dirty animals in line with pigs. As a result, there are many stray dogs in the streets of Kabul, not only living a life tortured by hunger and disease, but by human cruelty as well. It would make my blood boil when I'd see kids throwing stones at puppies or kicking them, and I'd seen dogs with their ears cut off or missing other limbs.

But Rasmus persuaded me to go look for the puppies. For about an hour, we looked for the puppies in the abandoned house and the overgrown backyard in vain. Only after we gave up and were heading back to the Land Cruiser did Rasmus notice a small tuft of black fur hidden poking out from the bushes in the small ditch where we parked. It was a puppy, and it was gasping in the heat. Judging by the size of it, it couldn't have been more than five or six weeks old. It turned its head slightly, opened its eyes just a tiny bit, and then let its head sink back down onto the dirty ground. I lifted up the dirty clump of fur and saw that it was a girl. She was weak and far too warm.

So, I took her home to the DDG-villa, placed her in the shade of a fruit tree in the garden, and served her a plate of cold milk, followed by a plate of liver pate. She slurped a little milk and took a tiny bite of the pate. Then, she looked up at me and lay back down to fall asleep.

That same evening, when Rasmus and I were sitting in the living room, trying to keep up to date with the news of the world outside Afghanistan via BBC World, the puppy came running in. Her eyes were now filled with life. And as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she jumped up on the couch next to me and licked my fingers. At that moment, I realized that she was my dog. I promised

myself that I would never abandon her, regardless of the amount of practical challenges this could bring in the future. Our Afghan employees couldn't believe their eyes when I fenced in the garden in the following weeks and got a carpenter to install a doghouse on the terrace.

Of course, she also needed a name, and since it was Rasmus who first spotted her, I felt like it had to be a Swedish name. I christened her Selma after the Swedish author and Nobel Prize winner Selma Lagerlöf.

In addition to our mobile EOD teams and our demining operation in the field outside of Kabul, we also had demining operations in Jalalabad and the province of Ghazni, located about 60 miles southwest of Kabul. Here, we had just finished clearing a big minefield surrounding an old Soviet base, one heavily infested with mines as a defense against the mujahedin. It goes without saying that it was a great day every time we swept a field completely. It was important to celebrate these moments. Not only could we show the locals that they could again be safe and secure in their daily lives, but it was also a truly proud moment for our deminers. Their work ethic and drive would increase every time they were recognized for their work. We figured they deserved some kind of ceremony, preferably with a large number of important guests, even if they are Taliban, which most of our deminers had absolutely no sympathy for.

Our people in Ghazni had planned a major ceremony and invited the local Taliban governor. The government official had, in his tremendous generosity, accepted this invitation and let them know he would arrive with his entourage at 3 p.m.

Our driver Hasheem, our operations officer Hayat, and I got in the Land Cruiser a little before noon so we could be sure to be there on time. Being late to a ceremony would be a diplomatic disaster and could, in the worst-case scenario, have implications for the cooperation between the DDG and the Taliban.

I'd lost 30 pounds over the past five weeks due to ongoing diarrhea, which I could only suspect had been caused by our chef's lack of cleanliness and kitchen hygiene. I needed to go 20-30 times a day, often involuntarily. I was getting weaker and weaker. Later, I'd be diagnosed with Amoebiasis—a gastrointestinal infection. Though I received a large amount of penicillin to defeat the infection, I will probably never entirely recover. But on this journey to Ghanzi, I hadn't been treated yet. And during the two-hour drive on the ridiculous excuse for a road, I had to make multiple involuntary stops, where I'd stagger out of the car to leave my mark on the Afghan soil. To the great amusement of my Afghan companionship, I might add.

The bumpy gravel road was the only tangible evidence of human activity in this godforsaken part of the planet. The landscape was dominated by big, wide and flat plains, which were broken up

only by steep mountains. My senses detected the magnificent view, but due to the diarrhea, I spent the ride hunched apathetically on the front seat, lacking the energy to really take in the view.

As we traveled along, I noticed a tiny black dot on the right side of the road, a couple of miles ahead. It was impossible to make out what it was from such a distance, but I kept my eye on it as we approached. It was too small to be a Taliban checkpoint, besides, it really wouldn't make sense to have one here in the middle of nowhere. Maybe it was an animal that had been hit by a vehicle and left in a ditch. Whatever it was, the placement of the object or creature didn't seem natural. When we got close enough to make out what the object was, I realized what we were looking at. It was a human. A man in a wheelchair. I stared at the crouching figure, sitting there alone in the 125-135 °F heat in the relentless summer sun. The creature—my mind was blurred by disease, and I could hardly recognize this as a man—seemed to register our approaching car and turned a wheel on the wheelchair, spinning around to face us.

Hasheem slowed down to avoid hitting the person in the wheelchair, and also because everyone's curiosity was piqued. We approached the poor fellow slowly, and I could see that he was an elderly man. He was more like the ruin of something that was once human, with a face lined and marked by pain and poverty. On his head, he wore a dusty black scarf. Both his legs were missing, and his black rags were pulled up underneath the two stumps.

As we passed him, he slowly stretched out his arms toward the car. He sat there simply to beg from passing vehicles. I saw him disappearing in a cloud of dust as we went by, still with his arms stretched out toward us, trying to turn his body in the direction of the car.

I will never forget the sight of his feeble frame, his almost skull-like face, and the faint spark of life in his eyes, staring at me expressionlessly from the bottom of pitch-black sockets. How did he get there? He was at least seven miles from the nearest settlement. And how did he survive the heat? Nobody could withstand that kind of weather for very long. To this day, it astounds me that I did not help him. Why didn't I order the car to stop to give him a bottle of water or a few dollars? Just a tiny bit of my enormous wealth contrasted with what he had. I could have made a huge difference for him. Maybe I was paralyzed by the surrealism of the moment. Maybe I thought that someone had just placed him there for a little bit and would return immediately to take him back to his family. I can't remember what I was thinking at the moment. But for several years, I couldn't get the image of that old man in the wheelchair out of my mind. At least until I met a colleague with a Pakistani background and great insight into the Afghan situation who finally gave me some kind of an explanation. He told me that Afghanistan had organized criminal gangs who would abduct children or young men and deliberately turn them into invalids by—for example—amputating limbs or cutting out their tongues. These poor

individuals had no hope for a normal life after that. No family, no friends, no care, and no education. They became totally dependent on these terrible kingpins who would use them as beggars. To them, these helpless beings were just another source of income. He was probably driven out there every morning to beg from the few passing cars only to be picked up again by the end of the day. God only knows what kind of miserable conditions he was forced to live in. Day after day, month after month, year after year, he probably lived in that nightmare. And he'll probably do so until his body gives up or his captors decide that he is no longer profitable and leave him somewhere to die.

My thoughts stayed with that old man until we arrived at the minefield. We parked next to a small square where all our deminers were waiting excitedly; proud of having made a small area of fertile grounds a safer place for their compatriots.

The Ghazni province was fertile by Afghan standards, and most farmers grew their crops in the fields around the green groves where water ran through the small, cleverly constructed canals. These irrigation systems had been the lifeline for Afghan farmers for centuries. But following the invasion of the Soviets, their land had been turned into a dangerous minefield. Notwithstanding, the farmers and their families still worked in those fields. They knew how dangerous it was, but they were simply forced to continue on. They didn't have any other source of income than their crops. They also needed to cross the minefield to get to the city of Ghazni, where they would sell their products at the market. It wasn't uncommon to see children, adults, and animals in this area that had been crippled and lost hands, arms, legs, or eyes due to exploding mines. But now, the local population could move safely through the area again, and the ceremony with the provincial governor himself was to be held in a shady and lush grove in the heart of the now-cleared minefield. Our people had cleaned up the square in a beautiful Afghan manner. There was a small table in the shade, which had been decorated with a white tablecloth for the occasion, and our people had prepared tea and cookies for later. Around the little clearing they arranged pots of flowers and plants, and on one side of the table, there were a row of chairs for the prominent company—the governor was to be seated the middle, surrounded by his entourage, and I was to sit on the far right.

Everything was ready. The entire staff stood excitedly behind the table when the governor arrived, surprisingly punctually, at 3 p.m. in a Toyota pick-up with a bunch of young, aggressive-looking Taliban in the bed. They were all dressed in long, black, loose robes, and wore the characteristic black scarves wrapped around their heads. And of course, they all carried the obligatory AK-47. Out of the truck stepped a chubby and remarkably young governor dressed in a shiny white robe and a little white hat. I walked toward him and he met my gaze with small, black eyes that exuded anything but kindness. He stiffly, yet politely, greeted this beardless, ungodly Westerner.

I had been strongly urged by several Taliban to grow a beard. But every time, I let them know in loud-and-clear English that they, under no circumstances, should interfere with my facial hair. I often added that they could go ahead and kiss a certain place where the sun doesn't shine, which tended to put an end to that conversation. But on this particular day, and in my capacity as a representative of the DDG, it probably wouldn't have been a good idea to answer the Taliban governor in that manner should my lack of a beard become a topic of conversation once again.

While the guests were lead to their seats, I noticed that many of our deminers looked at the governor and his gang with the utmost respect. Some looked almost frightened. Once the guests were in their seats, it was I, who, via a translator, welcomed everyone to the ceremony.

I talked a little bit about the DDG's work and missions, expressing my pride and pleasure at the sight of this newly swept field where the local community could now go about their business without putting their lives in danger. After that, a couple of photographs were taken, and the tea and cookies were served.

I was not at all interested in interacting with the governor any further, and stayed put in my chair. But I did note that our operational officer, Hayat, immediately went over to the governor and was more than willing to converse with him. The governor had loosened up quite a bit, and was almost giggling as he repeatedly glanced over in my direction.

As the only beardless white man, completely surrounded by Taliban and other Afghans, I felt quite isolated and alone. I began pondering whether the representatives of this xenophobic, fundamentalist regime were even grateful for what we—the ungodly foreigners—were doing for their country. With our money, we financed the deminers operations in their country, often risking our lives to present them with the ultimate prize: a community where life is safer and significantly easier for its population. But then these rulers felt the need to ridicule us over something as insignificant as our beards and our attire, disregarding our general conduct. As a Dane, it is still completely incomprehensible to me how one could have such an outlook on life, supporting a society that oppresses its own people in such a manner, especially their women. Most of the Taliban were very poorly educated and probably deeply brainwashed by their upbringing. But the leaders weren't and aren't ignorant. They were often well educated and were well aware of the Western conditions. They were motivated by a fierce hatred of the West and our values, and also a feeling of frustration and inferiority about not having evolved even half as much as the Western world.

Sitting here in the cleared grove, I had no idea what the governor was thinking about me. And I didn't care. I knew, however, that other Taliban looked at us from the DDG with slightly less-strict eyes, because we were deminers. The Taliban considered us to be rather manly, unlike the “flour-



distributors” from the other NGOs. I looked over at the unlikely pair and shook my head on the inside. *Assholes*. Then, I got up, politely greeted the governor, and strolled out into the now safe grove.

Only when I was alone did I notice how beautiful my surroundings really were. But this world that I’d found myself in was so strange that, even as I stood there, and despite having chosen the job myself, I couldn’t wait to get away. There was no way I could know at that moment that I’d end up spending a lot more time in Afghanistan than I had bargained for.

## Chapter Eight: New world order

The day began differently than it typically did.

The DDG's boss from company headquarters in Copenhagen, Bo Bischoff, announced his forthcoming visit to Afghanistan so he could meet us and keep abreast of our various demining operations.

Bo had a background as a sergeant in the army, had a master in business administration, and worked in one of the larger consulting firms as one of their big-shot corporate executives for a while. But, like many other people in the civilian world, he craved soul-fulfilling work and excitement in his life, so he began to work as a teamleader for humanitarian transports in the Balkans between 1994 and 1996, when the region was at its worst. Following that, he worked with humanitarian demining teams in Southeast Asia and Africa before founding the DDG in the late 90s.

Bo was a tall, charismatic, and intelligent man with an unusual goatee he liked to stroke while attentively listening to what other people had to say. He was an excellent listener, one of those men who didn't just hear what you had to say, but actually comprehended it. I really liked the guy, and was looking forward to his visit. In the morning, we prepared our presentation for him, filled with updates on what was going on in our part of the world. Around lunch, I went to pick him up at Kabul airport, where he'd just arrived on a UN flight from Islamabad. In the afternoon, we sat on the terrace of the DDG villa, had a chat, and enjoyed a gin and tonic. In the evening, we had dinner and continued our talk on the terrace underneath the full moon. Multiple times we talked about not having seen any BBC World news that day, because our satellite receiver hadn't been working. The date was September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and our only connection to the outside world was our Thrane & Thrane satellite telephone.

Around 11 p.m., that phone rang in the operation room in the basement. I went down to answer it. It was our desk officer in Copenhagen, who asked me in a nervous voice whether we had seen the news that day. I told him we hadn't, and he quickly updated me. He told me one of the biggest American symbols of Western freedom, the World Trade Center in New York City, had been hit by two commercial jets, and it looked to be a terrorist attack, though that hadn't been confirmed yet.

I was shocked. Even worse so when he called me back about 20 minutes later to confirm that it had been a terrorist attack with a total of three planes crashing into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in Washington.

I immediately called our sister organizations and the UN headquarters, only to be informed that al-Qaida, and by extension, Afghanistan, were being associated with the terrorist attacks. Both in the UN and the NGO areas, there had already been talk about evacuating the city—it made no sense to

stay. It was, at least, certain that all demining operations had come to an immediate halt under these new circumstances.

Bo, Fredrik, and I discussed our options and decided to evacuate to Pakistan. We quickly packed up our operations room and informed our local guy that he should let a guard stay at the villa. We jammed our most important things for the trip into the Land Cruiser: water, rations, and extra fuel.

Before we set our alarm clocks for 4 a.m. the next morning, we got another update from Copenhagen. Both towers in New York had collapsed and more than 3000 people had been killed.

I didn't get much sleep that night. We left the villa promptly at 4.30 a.m. We drove through Kabul and a few Taliban checkpoints. I drove as fast as I possibly could toward the Khyber Pass and the border post of Torkham. I insisted that Selma come with us, and Bo accepted with hesitation. It was lucky he was a dog person; she sat on his lap in the back seat and emptied the result of her motion sickness on his pants. Four times. Fortunately that was the biggest incident that happened to us in the nine-hour drive to Islamabad and the comfortable DDG house in the green and well-maintained embassy district.

That evening, 19 NATO countries' leaders swore the so-called Musketeer's oath for the first time in the North Atlantic Treaty's 52-year history. It was a decision of collective self-defense, one that stated an armed attack against one NATO country was the same as an attack on all of them. And so, the fighting began.

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, the soldiers comprising the first wave of "Operation Enduring Freedom" were sent to Afghanistan. The troop consisted of six F-16 fighters and 150 men, including elite soldiers from the U.S. Delta Force and the British SAS. They began searching the famous cave complex of the Tora Bora Mountains along the border to Pakistan.

On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, the U.S. presented evidence of a direct connection between the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Osama bin Laden, and the al-Qaida bases in Afghanistan. The Taliban, who gave shelter to al-Qaida and refused to cooperate with the West to close down the terrorist training camps within their country's borders, were considered part of this network.

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, the first attacks by American and British planes and missiles commenced.

Since we didn't expect to resume our demining work in Afghanistan again, and the situation in Pakistan was getting more and more tense—it seemed very risky to be a Westerner there at that time—we began to make backup plans. At first, we prepared to evacuate to India. We got the visas and made plans for our escape route. But then, Bo decided to send us to Eritrea in East Africa. The DDG had an operation established there, and he wanted us to take a course on explosive ordnance disposal when we

arrived.

But first, I had to stop by Denmark to drop Selma off with my family. So I purchased a crate, filled out the necessary paperwork, and got her on a flight with the Pakistani airline PIA. Since PIA wasn't the most trusted airline, especially when it came to livestock, I insisted on speaking to the captain when I boarded. At first, I was rejected. But after getting semi-aggressive with a Pakistani steward and drawing a small crowd, I made sure the captain knew there was a dog on board and that there was enough oxygen in the animal's cabin of the aircraft. I'm pretty sure the captain had never experienced anything like this before, but he assured me that everything was in order, and that relaxed me a little. Still, I was on edge for the entire flight, and could only calm down after I opened Selma's green cage in Copenhagen and she sprang toward me with her tail wagging.

Selma turned out to be one of my life's best decisions. She has now been my faithful companion for 13 years (she has just been celebrated with lasagne and icecream at her birthday), and is at this very moment lying right next to me on the floor. I have always loved dogs. The miserable life they and other animals endure has had a big impact on me, and they've always been my soft spot. I've had the great pleasure of helping many stray dogs in Chechnya, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Iraq; I always made sure to bring some food for the malnourished dogs that sneak around in those dreary places looking for anything edible. You can call me sappy and naive, that's totally fine by me. The locals obviously thought I was completely crazy.

After a few days at home in October, I flew to Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. Here, two years of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea—costing 70,000 people their lives—had lead to the south of Eritrea being completely littered with minefields and UXO, such as aircraft bombs, grenades, and rockets. After a short briefing at the DDG headquarters, I was driven through lush and beautiful highlands toward the open spaces in the south, alongside Denmark's best and most experienced EOD expert, Jørgen Sørensen, and a few other colleagues.

The DDG camp stood isolated in the middle of the savannah. The nearest town was several hours away and consisted of only old, worn clay huts where the local deminers, the cooks, and we outsiders ate and slept. I'd never been to Africa before, and so I was very impressed by the wildlife. On my first jog along the red dirt road leading away from the camp, I saw three snakes, some gazelles, and several giant birds. The area where we trained was less idyllic. Ammunition and parts of weapons were scattered everywhere across the terrain, and on more than one occasion, we also came across human bones.

Our focus was first and foremost to defuse aircraft bombs weighing between a half and a whole

ton, which had either been abandoned or hadn't gone off when they struck the ground. We also removed anti-personnel and anti-tank mines just like we did in Afghanistan. The Eritrean terrain, however, allowed us to use a mine detonator—a Danish-designed vehicle that, by using big rolls with heavy shackles mounted to it, slaps the soil and detonates any mines in its path—before we'd need to turn to manual sweeping. However, the detonator wasn't guaranteed to detect all of the mines, so we would still need to do the manual work. All the same, it was much faster with this mechanical helper.

Right before our arrival in the country, an anti-tank mine had escaped the grinds and detonated at the exact moment the wheel of the rear axle touched it. Right above this axle, the driver of the vehicle sat in an armored cabin. This particular mine had been so strong, it whirled the driver around as if he were in a washing machine. On that day, the driver was a Dane named Jens, and he got his foot crushed and received a few other minor injuries. Fortunately, no accidents happened during the time I spent at the camp. After 14 fruitful EOD-training days, we returned to Asmara.

Meanwhile, back home in Denmark, the country's new government had been elected on November 20<sup>th</sup>. As one of his first actions, the newly elected Prime Minister and now NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen, consulted with the Foreign Policy Committee regarding whether the Danish Special Operations Forces would participate in the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan.

I jumped at the thought of the Danish Jaegers in Afghanistan. It almost goes without saying that I felt the need to contribute my knowledge and experience, so I contacted the Jaeger Corps and let them know I was interested should anything come to pass. Shortly after, I was sent to Kabul with Rasmus to oversee the DDG house. The situation in the city was tense and uncertain. The U.S. forces had, together with the Northern Alliance, driven the Taliban out of the city and many other northern parts of the country.

The people in Kabul seemed happy about it, but at the same time, they were also nervous and stayed indoors, only venturing out into the city for the most necessary of errands. The streets were pretty much empty in those days. They primarily occupied by stray dogs, wandering around and looking for food and warmth.

We were worried that the DDG house had been taken apart. We only had a single guard—our 17-year-old “maid”—who lived in the house while we were gone, and he certainly wouldn't pose any kind of threat to a Taliban fighter who wanted to steal our vehicles or furniture in their escape to the country's southern provinces. But to our great joy and relief, everything seemed pretty much untouched. We spent the week packing up the rest of the stuff and working out. At that point, I'd accumulated a decent amount of gym equipment, but up until then, there hadn't been much time to actually use it. I used the winding staircase that led from the basement to the first floor for interval

training, and in our little gym on the first floor, I used our exercise machines that had been assembled with a good deal of creativity by using old gears, metal bars, and the help from a local blacksmith.

In those days, I began noticing the characteristic condensation trails over the city from the huge American B-52 bombers. Crossing the deep blue sky, they headed toward the south to unload their deadly cargo over the Tora Bora Mountains. I remember thinking to myself that I wanted to be on the same path. Fortunately, only days later, I received an e-mail that I'd been waiting for. It was from the Jaeger Corps, and they wanted me to come back to Denmark to participate in the preparations for the imminent mission in Afghanistan. This was exactly what I wanted, so I immediately terminated my contract with the DDG and returned to Copenhagen.

The new world order was revolutionizing its defense.

Denmark has in its recent history only taken part in peacekeeping missions, where the warring sides have invited Danish soldiers to Cyprus, the Gaza Strip, Croatia, Macedonia, the Caucasus, Kashmir in India, Georgia, and Eritrea. Since 1991, Denmark had only sent the frigate HDMS Olfert Fischer to Kuwait during the first Gulf War and small groups of the Jaeger Corps to Sarajevo in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999.

Now, for the first time ever, the Jaeger Corps was being sent to a real war situation. We were going to be on the front lines, exploring and gathering intelligence, contributing to the overall objective of the coalition in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaida.

So, on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2002, I assembled alongside 101 combat-ready comrades from the Jaeger Corps and Frogman Corps at Aalborg Air Base, prepared for the prime minister to send us off.

## Chapter Nine: At war with the Taliban and al-Qaida

I arrived at the air base in Kandahar, one of the three southern provinces of Afghanistan, in a great mood. I felt like I had a record to set straight. For almost eight months, I'd lived in this country and had been considered a second-class citizen by its Taliban rulers. I'd been insulted for not having a beard and spat at more than once in the streets of Kabul. Now, I was back, and wearing my uniform and carrying my weapon.

I was a part of Task Force K-Bar, and mine was the first elite unit in the war against terror. Comprised of 1300 special operators from, amongst others, the U.S. Navy SEALs, the Special Air Service from Australia and New Zealand, Kommando Spezialkräfte (KSK) from Germany, the Norwegian Jegerkommando, and the Danish Jaeger Corps and Frogman Corps, our unit's mission was, simply, to identify and engage Taliban and al-Qaida.

In nine months, Task Force K-Bar achieved 42 reconnaissance missions and an unknown number of combat missions that led to 115 deaths and 107 captures of enemy combatants, including two instances where Danish Jaegers captured a number of enemy combatants and handed them over to the Americans.

The Taliban had, since 1996, ruined their country and their people with their medieval outlook and draconian laws. Now, the Western world had unified their military forces, led by the Americans, for Operation Enduring Freedom—an effort to undo the damage the Taliban had left behind. It delighted me that the Taliban felt pressed by our presence. They were driven from all major cities and training camps across the country, and had been forced to seek shelter in the southernmost provinces of Waziristan—in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The mountains in the southeastern part of the country were a favorite getaway location for both the Taliban and al-Qaida. U.S. spy planes had recorded frenzied activity in the hostile provinces of Khost, Paktika, Paktia, Lowgar, and Nangahar, the latter best known as the caves of Tora Bora. The enemy was fighting against the coalition from safe houses in Pakistan or small villages on the Afghan side of the border.

When we arrived at Kandahar Airfield, KAF, the place showed fresh scars following the Taliban's hasty escape a couple of weeks earlier. Almost none of the sand-colored buildings of the dusty air base were intact. Only a few of them had doors or windows, and the content of the barracks was very spartan: mattresses on the floor, dirty kitchens, waiting rooms without benches or chairs, disgusting toilets, and communication equipment from before the Russians had been in the country. The roads of the base were gravel or sand; at best, patches of asphalt. Mines and unexploded ordnance

lay strewn around the base, which the EOD units hurried to blow up. The base was once used for domestic flights. The worn-out Russian Antonov Turboprop airplanes sat on the cement square in front the old terminal building looking like monuments of a forgotten time. It was a glaring contrast to the American state-of-the-art military hardware parked nearby. Armored vehicles equipped with the latest weapons and radar systems, transport helicopters, and giant C-17 transport aircraft methodically coming and going, delivering supplies of equipment, food, and drink for the hungry war machine throughout the night—all flying in the daytime was forbidden at that point, since it was believed the Taliban had a couple of Stinger surface-to-air missiles. Ironically, those were the same missiles the Americans had given to the mujahedin in the 1980s during their fight against the Russians.

A few weeks prior to the arrival of the operational teams from Task Force K-Bar, about 800 infantrymen from the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) had overtaken and secured the base until regular U.S. Army units could replace them in the following months. It was very reassuring to know that the USMC was in charge of security. They're a unit that I have a great deal of respect for, and knowing that 800 Marines were on the lookout meant that the quality of my sleep was upped a few levels. In contrast to many other U.S. units, the Marine Corps isn't so fixated on technology and often operate under primitive field conditions with older equipment. Historically, it has always been Marines who first get inserted into bloody and intense operations across the globe, and they always demonstrate a high degree of discipline and courage. And when I talked to them, they also had a friendly attitude and showed sincere interest in who I was and where I came from. They were very proud of being American Marines, but also humble. They would say, "The USMC is only a small unit." By small, they meant 190,000 men.

I couldn't bear to tell them that the Danish army had plans to deploy 1,500 soldiers.

The KAF would serve as the main base for some of the elite units responsible for operations in high-risk zones, predominately in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. During the first six months of 2002, the base was still primitive—without the usual welfare facilities that Western soldiers today take more or less for granted. But in the following years, the base was transformed in an impressive pace that only Americans have resources for. From a once primitive and run-down provincial airport emerged a modern, autonomous mini-community with heat and running water, modern residential containers with satellite TV, Internet, direct telephone lines to the whole world, bus routes, hospitals, Burger Kings, Pizza Huts, restaurants, shopping centers, and gyms.

Today, KAF is Afghanistan's largest military base and accommodates 25,000 personnel.

At the heart of the base, there stood a fenced section only accessible to elite units. No one else was allowed in. We were a camp within a camp. And we Danes from Task Force Ferret inhabited an



old, oblong, stone building consisting of 10-15 small rooms and an area of approximately 150x450 feet. It was a compressed camp with sleeping tents, a chow hall tent, a communications center, kitchen facilities, toilet facilities, and a logistics department with spare parts and equipment.

We slept in cramped tents without heat, and since temperatures often reached double-digits below zero during January and February nights, we'd spend much of the night shivering in our sleeping bags on our little camp beds. Others slept in small rooms measuring 12x9 feet. Every single inch of tents and rooms were exploited. Weapons were hung from the ceiling. Boots and shoes were hung from hooks. Small bookshelf systems were bolted to the bed. Personal items were kept in boxes under the beds, and all the walls were plastered with maps and sketches—and obviously the obligatory “titty poster” here and there. The toilet facilities were a demonstration of very basic carpentry skills: three wooden panels around a plastic chair with a hole in the middle, and a cut-up rain shield for a door. The shower facilities were more advanced, largely because our creative mechanics had, with help from a vehicle's radiator hose, managed to develop a system that heated up water inside of barrel capable of holding a 25-gallons reservoir. Our camp's 102 soldiers would patiently wait in line in hopes of getting a pee-bag filled with lukewarm water to hang on a hook in the bath tent to take the edge off the otherwise icy water.

The daily dose of food in the chow hall consisted exclusively of the army's standard field rations for the first few months. With all the preservatives they contained, the life expectancy of the Task Force must have been extended considerably. There were no fresh fruits or vegetables. It actually became a problem for some of the operators; not having the necessary vitamins, minerals, and protein took a toll on their health. A general fatigue and ennui settled in. I experienced it, too. Of course, this change in temperament and lethargy was highly unacceptable for us given the extreme physical demands that our operational tasks might require. Fortunately, the quality of the food did improve a little bit by the end of the winter when increased supply allowed it.

The room that functioned as an assembly room and bar had walls made of clay. Again, our carpentry skills were tested. With wood collected from different places around the base, we eventually created a nice, functioning bar top, some small tables, chairs, couches, and even a covered patio in front of the bar—which we of course baptized the “K-Bar.” The problem was, we didn't have any beer or any other kind of alcohol in the bar for the first several weeks, so water was the only lubricant when exchanging war stories with our large, bearded patrons.

There was a pleasant, informal atmosphere in the camp. You could watch movies in the sleeping tents, play cards in the chow hall, and there was talk and smoking in the square out front of the tents at night. Even the commanding officers had relaxed and become less stringent. Everyone in the

camp understood the seriousness of our missions and were deeply serious when it came to operational matters, so it simply wasn't necessary to enforce a rigid military tone and conduct in our down-time.

One morning, still in my underpants as I'd just taken a shower, I passed by a gray-haired gentleman in shorts, sunglasses, and no shirt, carrying two half gallon bottles filled with urine. It was actually the commanding officer of the Jaeger Corps, later head of the entire Danish battalion, Frank Lissner. Like the rest of us, he hadn't wanted to leave his warm sleeping bag in the middle of the night to walk hundreds of feet through the dark, frozen camp just to pee in a hole. Meeting your boss in such an outfit and in such a situation is obviously not an everyday occurrence. But here we were, exchanging friendly greetings as if the circumstances had been the most natural in the whole world.

In the beginning of my tour, I was part of a team in the intelligence section (S2) and liaison to other nations and entities. It was my job to help out using my experience in the private sector as a deminer. I had sketches and drawings of Russian minefields, and I knew what areas of operation were littered with UXOs after a decade of fighting between the Russians and the mujahedin. Moreover, the threat of mines and UXOs had increased after the U.S. bombing raids in late 2001. As a general rule, about 5-10 percent of all fired grenades and bombs don't detonate when they land for technical reasons, and we had to acknowledge that risk when planning our operations.

It was certainly not my dream job to sit behind a desk. But I needed to deal with it at first. I was just happy to be back in the Jaeger Corps and in one of the world's danger zones. That said, I made it very clear to my superiors that I wanted to be operative instead of merely being part of the staff.

Military operations are the core of a professional soldier's identity and eligibility, and for me personally as a Jaeger soldier, it has always been the most attractive to work in an operative team. To serve there, I feel, is the biggest privilege you can achieve as a soldier. It is only there that a soldier will be ultimately tested on skills they've practiced for years. So my heart was with my team and my comrades there. I didn't want to serve in an office, where I would sit on my ass, slurp a cup of lukewarm coffee, do some paperwork, and slowly get sucked into the system's bureaucratic monster. I had only respect and gratitude for those who wanted that, but it wasn't where I belonged. So I worked toward getting away from the base, taking full advantage of any opportunity to leave the desk to go out on a mission where I could be used to help blow up Taliban ammunition caches.

I had a lot of catching up to do after being away from the Jaeger Corps for eight years. The unit has undergone a series of significant changes during the 90s in regards to assignments, equipment, and culture. When I left the Corps in 1993, it did not have an operational mindset. The ideas behind the training and the theory weren't geared toward operations because the politicians did not allow deployment into war zones for the first three decades of the Jaeger Corps' existence. The Danish

military was not in combat during the Cold War, with the exception of “softer” UN missions as seen in the Middle East and Africa. The unit that I was experiencing now consisted of young, very resourceful and bright men. They would throw around terms, lingo, operation types, and procedures I had never heard of. So I quickly noticed that a number of smart people had transformed the Corps from a long-range reconnaissance patrol unit to a first-class special operations forces unit. Just like the army during its missions in the Balkans during the 90s, they had undergone a huge change for the better.

In the first year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Corps was now trained and equipped to face the enemy on a very challenging and elusive battlefield. Ours was an enemy who didn’t give a damn about previously recognized and respected conventions of warfare. Using methods such as terrorism, sabotage, and guerilla warfare, enemy combatants were often hard to distinguish from the civilian population.

Not that the Corps didn’t still carry out special reconnaissance. We certainly did and we were, and I say this without ego, some of the best in the world at it. But the Corps had become much more. We had to rescue hostages via direct action, evacuate, carry out sensitive site exploitation (SSE), recover shot-down aircrews (CSAR), provide close protection to VIPs, and eliminate and solve key localization and mobility operations with special vehicles. In addition to that, we had to be able to operate in all kinds of climates: desert, jungle, arctic cold, and of course, the damp and windy Danish winters—some of the harshest weather a soldier can operate in. The desert is hot and tough, but bearable if you have water. The arctic cold is bad, but it’s dry. But the cold, windy, and wet weather that we have in Denmark are the three worst conditions combined. Furthermore, it is dark for a good portion of the year, which might be good for soldiers during operations—since we Jaegers mostly operate in the dark—but it is mentally exhausting to not see a lot of daylight.

Since I’d missed so much in my eight years away from the Corps, I found myself needing to spend tremendous amounts of time and energy catching up to my comrades and updating myself on the new procedures and the communications and weaponry systems.

For maintaining our physical training, we used a former Russian military base we referred to as Tarnak Farms. Consisting of 10-15 concrete barracks, the base was surrounded by a high stone wall and contained leftovers of an old obstacle course. Of the approximately 30 al-Qaida training camps in the country, this base was said to have been the third biggest one, only surpassed by the camps at Tora Bora in the Nangarhar province and the camp in Zaeware in the Paktia province.

It was here, a twenty-minute drive along a dusty gravel road southwest from Kandahar Air Base, that Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida had plotted the hijacking of four airplanes with intent to fly them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. A few years earlier, al-Qaida had released a video

recorded at Tarnak Farms showing a man speaking and smiling in the company of his terrorist friends. His name was Mohammed Atta, and on 9/11, he flew one of the planes that crashed into the World Trade center, turning it into Ground Zero.

In November 2001, the U.S. engaged in a massive terrorist camp bombing campaign. Unfortunately, the terrorists had, in most instances, already evacuated the camps. After combing the Tarnak Farms complex in 2002, units from the U.S. and Canada found it had not only housed training camps for al-Qaida, but had also contained a laboratory where tests of biological weapons were carried out in an attempt to develop lethal anthrax. The coalition forces now used Tarnak Farms as a shooting range. Going inside the complex itself, however, was stupid and risky. Unexploded grenades, mortar rounds, and anti-personnel mines represented a hidden, deadly enemy, and there was no reason to risk it. Unfortunately, a team from the U.S. Navy SEALs did not take this threat seriously, and one morning in late March decided to practice a simulated hostage liberation exercise at Tarnak Farms. Before al-Qaida had abandoned the camp, they installed a daisy chain of mines along one of the buildings. A daisy chain, as you might expect, is a string of multiple explosives connected to each other that, when triggered, results in disaster. One Navy SEAL died when this one exploded, and several others were badly wounded.

When we were training or testing our weapons at Tarnak Farms, we always kept to the outside of the camp walls, placing a few guards in the direction of the enemy and using the surrounding desert as a gigantic shooting range. This place had nothing to do with calculating shot angles or rigid rules about time restrictions and environmental concerns. We would simply unload everything we could in all calibers into the wall of the former terrorist camp: recoilless rifles, anti-tank weapons, small arms in most calibers, grenade launchers, sniper rifles, smoke, incendiary, and hand grenades. Everything we had brought. We'd practice firing at the wall to test how much was needed to breach it—essential information for future operations. We'd exercise the team's fire and support procedures that we'd use in combat and would have shooting competitions. I was always a participant, since I had so much to catch up on. During the first couple of weeks in Afghanistan, I fired off almost as much ammo, rehearsed almost as many procedures, and was trained in almost as much new material as I was in my entire first three years in the Corps. I was like a little kid, rolling around in a massive sandbox, playing with all his new and exciting toys. And this was how I wanted it to be.

I managed to reduce my time as an office staffer to a third. And after working like that for two and a half months, I caught a break. Or rather, a big fellow Jaeger broke his wrist during an operation, and I was told I'd be his replacement as a breacher/demolition specialist on his team. After years of wishing, I was now exactly where I wanted to be. I was an operative Jaeger.

As a 34-year-old, I was not the youngest among the operatives, but I was also not the oldest. Though the nasty amoeba I'd gotten in Afghanistan the year before had taken its toll on my health, the months of calm and rest, followed by my return to training, had seen me return to the height of my physical abilities. My strength and endurance quickly eliminated any kind of doubt about my age being an obstacle that would prevent me from serving in a team.

I was back in business.

## Chapter Ten: Deep in Taliban territory

I could finally call myself a Jaeger again. From day one, I felt totally at home in my new five-man team. René was our patrol leader. He was the most experienced among us, with eight years of operational service. His outgoingness and social manner made him a natural leader. He maintained an infectious positive attitude no matter how pressured or tired he was. Peter was our paramedic, a sort of advanced nurse. He was exceptionally competent and sharp, often offering intelligent, analytical observations. He possessed a raw strength despite his lack of interest in fitness training. One day after jogging a few hundred feet from our camp, he passed a *reduce your speed* sign. He took it literally and returned to our air-conditioned team room. Our scout, Mikkel, had a calm and relaxed demeanor. He was a small, compact fellow, but strong as an ox and highly respected in the Corps. My final teammate was Henrik; he was in charge of communications. A tall, athletic, and likeable guy, Henrik had a marked stubbornness that made him dissatisfied with anything but the optimal solution to a problem. He was the youngest member of the team and one of my most valued colleagues, both as a soldier and as a human being.

I had managed to land the vacant position for the team's demolitions expert and breacher. *The man with the key* was another word for my function. I would blow up obstacles, such as doors and walls, in and around buildings where our team was operating. It was also my responsibility to place Claymore mines and alarm devices to protect my team when we were operating from an observation post.

After a couple of weeks on the team, it finally happened. We were going on an assignment. René had been informed about the job and called a meeting in the team room. He and I had just completed our daily 7-mile run around the base in the dusty afternoon heat when we stepped into the small, dark team room. The place also functioned as a lounge and our sleeping quarters. I was tense and could hardly wait for the briefing, but the rest of the team seemed rather relaxed. Peter, our paramedic, was lying on his bed, chuckling along to an episode of *Friends*. Mikkel, the scout, was lying on his belly, listening to his favorite American West Coast rock music. Our communications man, Henrik, was sitting at the table intently studying one of the field rations we'd been given for operational use.

After guzzling water, René gathered us around him and shared the details of the mission. Unmanned American drones—MQ-1 Predators—had, over the past week, kept a watchful eye on the border regions in the mountainous provinces 250 miles northeast of Kandahar Air Field. The Americans were acutely aware of the activity in specific localities around border villages. Their drones had captured pictures of Taliban and al-Qaida members crossing the border to Pakistan along small

tracks and roads, and then returning to Afghanistan to fight the American forces. There was also an assumption that the villages were being used as refuges for terrorists and their suppliers.

In favorable weather conditions, the Predator drone can identify a person's heat signature from a height of 9000 feet using its infrared, digital-zoom camera. However, the unstable weather of the late winter had made the Predator less effective. Task Force K-Bar was therefore assigned the task of observing activities in the area. Fortunately for us, this meant boots on the ground.

We listened attentively as René imparted his knowledge of the assignment—codenamed QA05. He was the only one on our team who had been in a real war-zone operation, even if it was in the somewhat laxer environment of the Balkans in the 1990s. We each held a look of absolute concentration fixed on our faces; we were fully aware of the gravity of our task, and knew it would be fraught with risk and danger. We would be inserted by helicopter at night, flying low over hills, mountains, and valleys, through areas swarming with armed enemies.

The terrain was challenging. The mountains from which we would observe our target reached an altitude of nine to twelve thousand feet. Steep rock faces, narrow gorges, steep ravines, and thin air would push our physical abilities to the limit. The operation was expected to span 10 days, which intensified our gear, food, and water requirements. The mountainous terrain was without water. We would have to carry everything we needed on our shoulders.

Al-Qaida and Taliban forces were on their home turf, and were further motivated by the prospect of capturing enemy soldiers—trophies—from the coalition. Special Forces soldiers, in particular, were considered high value targets. To capture, torture, and kill one of us in the most bestial and grotesque ways imaginable would serve to bring them great recognition and respect among their people.

We'd heard about a U.S. Navy SEAL who had met a gruesome fate when he'd been captured. He had been wounded during an operation after falling from a helicopter as it lifted off the ground. Al-Qaida forces found him, shot him in the knees and between the legs, cut his throat, and left him with his penis hanging from his mouth.

Obviously, we feared being captured. All of us would rather die fighting.

In spite of his positive nature, René was somber as he concluded the briefing. He stressed that being compromised was the biggest danger of our mission. Contact with the enemy, even civilians, would, even in the best possible scenario, lead to us pulling out. In the worst case, we would be fighting for our lives. We needed to be ready for action in three days. The moonlight would be minimal then, offering the best conditions for us to go in.

Preparations included gathering and compiling intelligence. Accurate, detailed information

about the enemy was crucial to the success of any military operation, particularly for those missions carried out in isolated territory such as this. We needed information about wind, light, rainfall, and temperature. We needed to know where the enemy was expected to be, whether they were armed and organized, and what their morale was. And finally, we'd need information about whether the local population was friendly or hostile, and where the nearest town or settlement was located. All of this had significant bearing on the decisions we'd make in the preparation phase.

If the enemy detected us, it was not just a matter of moving to a new area after a possible battle. Everyone in the area—Taliban, al-Qaida, and the local Pashtun population—would quickly find out there were foreign soldiers in the area and commence a merciless hunt.

Advanced computer programs provided us with information about the altitude and gradient of the mountains. We sought out the best places from which to observe the villages and the tracks we were interested in. The mountains flattened slightly toward the north, which would make it easier to move around. Unfortunately, it meant the same for our enemy.

Very few spots appeared suitable for observation posts. It was made up of only extreme cliff drops and impassable terrain. We had never seen such mountainous terrain despite our extensive training in, among other places, the Swiss mountains. All the gear we required for the 10-day-long operation would have to be carried in. With that in mind, we had no room for climbing equipment such as ropes and harnesses and would need to plan our route accordingly.

Mikkel eventually charted a landing zone using maps and computer-generated images. It was a massive challenge considering the terrain. The landing zone couldn't be too close to our observation base, since the enormous CH-47 helicopter taking us in was extraordinarily loud. Nor could the landing zone be too far away from our destination, since we would have to be able to reach it before daylight. Mikkel also picked out meeting points in case the team was to split up due to a gunfight. We still needed a plan in case it all went wrong—emergency escape routes all the way back to KAF would have to be mapped. We also needed to prepare procedures for contact with our own units.

Henrik busily prepared our communication systems. Internal radio frequencies needed to be fixed and coded. Peter checked and packed all the medical equipment and gave us each an emergency package including, amongst other things, morfin, painkillers and acute gastrological issues. I tested and prepared explosives, camouflaging all the grenades and wires to be used in securing and protecting the base with a sand-colored paint. I also reinforced our packs—affectionately called *ticks*—at critical weight-bearing points after realizing how heavy they were going to be.

We had to bring explosives, grenades, mines, extra ammunition, radios, GPS's, day- and night-time binoculars, thermal-observation gear, tripods, cameras, enough batteries to last for 10 days,



sleeping bags, shit bags, and freeze-dried food rations. When I finished packing my *tick*, I dragged it out into the hallway to weigh all my gear including vest, and weapon. I looked at the scales in astonishment: 181 pounds!

Furthermore, we'd need to bring drinking water with us. A Jaeger should drink at least five liters of water a day in the conditions we were going to face. We needed 13 gallons each for the 10 days we'd be there, which amounted to 66 gallons in total—of which 30 gallons had to be transported in two extra packs.

We left within eight hours of our briefing. Before embarking, we practiced formations and helicopter procedures by the camp's perimeter. It was a still and sunny afternoon when a sandstorm suddenly engulfed us. The sky and the horizon became one in a big cloud of dust and sand. A brownish fog clouded us with dust and made us look like expressionless wax dolls.

But we were focused and hardly noticed.

We were privileged in that the American 160th Operations Aviation Regiment, also called the Night Stalkers—a unit that works solely with Special Forces—would be inserting us. Better helicopter support simply does not exist anywhere in the world. They have the best pilots, the best equipment and the best helicopters. The giant MH-47D Chinook, with its tandem rotor, was developed exclusively to work with Special Forces. It came equipped with three 7.62 Gatling Miniguns, air-fuelling capability, a system for fast-roping and rappelling, and other improvements on the standard version. The 160th unit flies in conditions that no other helicopter crews can nor will. They land in the most difficult and unreachable landing zones, nearly always navigating in the dark without a single light source on the helicopter.

During the coordination briefing with the helicopter crew, the captain—a talkative but straight-faced guy in his early thirties—told us that the hour and a half of flying would be difficult and dangerous, taking place at night above terrain where mountain peaks rose sharply and with minimal warning. As a result, the pilots would be forced to fly in at a low level—just 30-60 feet off the ground—using NVGs to see. At that altitude, we'd also face a high risk of attack from enemies using rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, or even handheld weapons. Our landing zones would be especially difficult to navigate given the steep rock faces common to the area.

The aircrew's calm professionalism put us at ease, however. They were service-minded, and made it clear they would do everything in their power to deliver the best possible product. We were their customers. They existed to serve us.

Two hours before takeoff, we gathered in our small team, drank lots of water, and had one last solid meal—spaghetti with meat sauce. Our feet were almost as important as our stomachs. Hard skin

was filed off and our feet taped up before we carefully put on our boots—we wouldn't be taking them off for many days to come.

We exchanged a bit of everyday stuff about families, girlfriends, and dogs. Everyone knew it was meaningless chit chat, but there was no point in dwelling on the fact that we'd soon be in enemy territory, face to face with people with nothing to lose and a will to do anything within their power to kill us. There were a lot of unanswered questions. Would our operational procedures function? Would we be able to communicate with each other and KAF under the extreme circumstances of being in the mountains and desert?

As a rule, in the army, you never move outside your base in units smaller than 30 soldiers. When you do, you make sure you're backed up by firepower from light and heavy machine guns, mortars, and anti-tank weapons, as well as the option of support from aircraft or artillery and infantry reinforcements.

On this operation we would be only five men completely alone on a mountain, 250 miles from our base. When the helicopter left, we would have only ourselves, our packs, and whatever else we could carry. Nevertheless, we could ask for support from jet fighters and the awesome American flying fortress, the AC-130 Gunship, which carries a whole arsenal of weaponry systems. The AC-130 operates only at night, however, and five men on the ground couldn't count on jet fighters being available in the daytime, even if the need was there.

We sat on the ground in a large, dark, concrete space a few feet from the big Chinook helicopter's loading ramp. It was a colossal, spooky clump of metal against the starry night sky. Only the small green dots from the chemical light sticks in the cabin gave an impression of the giant's size. It could carry multiple vehicles.

I was ready to go, but we had to wait for the chaplain to come and bestow his blessings and prayers upon us. As an atheist, this aggravated me. I believe in my ability and skills as a soldier and as a human being, in coincidence and luck. Right now, in the minutes leading up to my first operation, most of all I just wanted a bit of privacy, not to be bothered by moral rituals that I was fundamentally opposed to, even if they were well meant.

We boarded. The turbines slowly grinded into action with a metallic screeching. The Chinook got moving and rolled toward the takeoff point where the remaining checks were to be carried out. The rotor revolutions increased, and the craft's four-wheel sets lifted from the ground. The outlines of darkened tents and buildings at the airfield disappeared in the distance as we roared eastward. It soon became clear that the helicopter captain's warnings about the flight being rocky were no exaggeration. I

had experienced low-level flying before, but nothing like this. The cabin sea-sawed, jerked and bumbled as if a bunch of drunken sailors were steering it. Sudden downward and upward lurches forced me to plant my feet as tightly as possible on the floor as I struggled to stay in my seat.

I flicked on my NVGs and looked out through the big opening at the back of the cabin. In the green light, I could see the loadmaster kneeling behind his fast-shooting Minigun. Suddenly, I got one hell of a fright. A deep, loud rumble cut through the cabin, drowning out the engine noise. The cabin was sailing and I was fighting to hold on to my seat. What the fuck was going on?

I turned toward the sound and saw the other loadmaster standing by a Minigun placed in the side door. It occurred to me that he had just fired at something on the ground. The pilot continued to swerve and weave to get us away from the enemy. This was serious. I looked at Mikkel. His camouflaged, bearded face was set in a broad grin. I returned the gesture, albeit a slightly more strained one.

I had consumed a lot of water in the previous hours, and that liquid, as we all know, has to pass back out. After flying for half an hour with at least three quarters of an hour remaining, I realized I wouldn't be able to hold it in. We had brought double plastic bags for this purpose, but I had hoped I wouldn't need them. It was now unavoidable. I held on to the row of seats with one hand and unsteadily got to my feet on the shaky cabin floor, which, as if to make the exercise even more difficult, was slick with hydraulic oil. I wrapped my free hand around my little friend and slipped the double bag over it like a giant condom.

There, 3000 miles from home, over the mountains of Afghanistan, I was standing half upright, dangling like a rodeo cowboy in the belly of a big unruly metallic beast, emptying my bladder. Had the situation not been so serious, I would have laughed at how bizarre it was. Instead, I finished my business in a hurry and located the black garbage bag on the wall.

Half an hour later, the loadmaster signaled our drop-off for the first time. Ten minutes. I switched on my GPS and memorized the infiltration route one last time. I also checked that everything was still in the pockets of my vest. Even though all the vital equipment was secured with a bungee cord, I had loose items in the vest, such as, among other things, my map. There was nothing written on the map. We never wrote on them because it would reveal our exact location if it landed in the wrong hands. It would be catastrophic to drop the map, regardless, not only because we needed it to navigate, but also because it would reveal our presence in enemy territory.

I also checked my weapon, including the infrared light and the strength of the small red dot in my rifle's sight. I sucked some water from the hose attached to my camel bag, which held one gallon of water. I flicked on my NVGs so that my eyes could get used to the green light and to more easily see

my friends in the cabin.

For all of us but René, this was our first mission. Even so, through the darkness and noise I sensed an atmosphere familiar from previous training exercises. It was the calm that descends when you are in the right place, at the right time, in your element. At least that's how I felt. I was in the best company possible—with some of the world's top soldiers. Those bastards could bring it on.

Almost simultaneously with the loadmaster's signal of one minute to go, the pilot lowered the speed. I located the carrier straps on my packs, getting ready to drag them off the ramp. Both our primary and alternative landing zones were small plateaus on ridges, according to the maps. In my NVGs, I could make out the surface of a black cliff below us. The loadmaster was lying flat on his belly, halfway out over the ramp to direct the pilot. This was the most vulnerable stage of the insertion phase, with all 15 tons of metal exposed and hovering noisily. A single grenade from an RPG, and it would be all over.

I began to get anxious; we were hovering too long. Way too long. Why not just land?

Suddenly, the engines roared and the pilot rolled sharply to the right. I struggled not to fall over. Had we been compromised? Had the enemy already seen us? The Americans usually didn't hold back from using their weapons, if there was reason to do so. The gunners' Miniguns sat silent. We couldn't have been spotted. It seemed the primary landing zone was simply not useable.

So we flew for another five minutes before receiving a *one-minute* signal. This time, there was no hesitation. Slow and steady, the helicopter descended until we were hanging still. Our loadmaster knelt, turned, and pointed with rapid movements of both arms, directing us out over the ramp.

*Go, go, go!*

With my packs dragging along the floor, I got out over the ramp and hit the ground. I let go of the water pack. Dragging both packs was impossible. They were too heavy. In an inferno of dust and gravel whipped up by the big rotor blades, I used all my strength to crawl away from the giant body of metal.

I threw myself on the ground as the Chinook lifted off and turned away like a majestic bird. It was quickly swallowed by darkness, our last contact with friends vanishing. We quickly secured our position from all angles. A deafening silence set in. Not a sound in the night.

I had been in Afghanistan a long time, but this was the first time I had experienced total silence. No barking dogs. No breeze. Nothing. It was as if we had found ourselves in a vacuum. Slowly, the whirled up dust fell to the ground, and we could finally orient ourselves. I looked around and gaped in astonishment. That helicopter crew was too cool.

They had dropped us off on a flat area not much bigger than fifteen by fifteen feet. They had

actually backed the helicopter toward a vertical mountain slope until just touching the edge. At no time did its wheels touch the ground. The loadmaster had directed everything with surgically precise instructions.

Made in America. Respect.

The terrain was rocky and barren, and we were surrounded by steep rock formations, which, like a theatrical setting, formed a silhouette against the night sky. Only sporadic vegetation was noticeable on the scattered plateau. It felt surprisingly warm despite the 9000-foot altitude. I took a sip of water.

“We’re at the alternative landing zone,” Mikkell reported.

Everyone nodded. There was no need to explain why we had to choose the alternative zone. We figured there must have been a problem with the primary one. Otherwise the pilot just wanted to confuse the Taliban and the local Pashtuns. At the same time, we realized that the infiltration route to our observation post was now longer.

“Everyone okay?” René asked. We answered him with silent nods. “Good, now let’s get moving,” he whispered.

Getting away from the landing zone as fast as possible was crucial. The Chinook had probably been heard in the villages a few miles away. That meant al-Qaida and Taliban forces would be aware of Special Forces in the area. They knew infantry units weren’t inserted in this kind of terrain.

“Thomas, you and I will hide the water packs,” Mikkell whispered. I crawled over to the one I was responsible for and grabbed the straps. The noise seemed deafening as I dragged it over the rock surface, dumped it in a small hollow, and covered it with sandy camouflage netting. We grabbed our personal *ticks*. It wasn’t possible to just sling a 140-pounds pack over your shoulder, so we assisted each other while the rest of the team secured our position. We all nodded to René, and he signaled to move forward.

I walked behind Mikkell, who, as our scout, lead the pack. He and I were moving 20 to 30 feet ahead of the other guys. Mikkell was focused on finding the way, while my task was to be our eyes and ears. I looked and listened for any abnormal activity, such as movement in the terrain or changes in light and sound. I sharpened my senses and flipped my weapon’s safety off. We moved slightly downhill from the landing zone to a larger plateau. I was already leaning forward to compensate for the extreme weight of my pack. After a few hundred feet, we reached the foot of the incline and stopped behind some bushes to listen and observe. The others arrived, and we nodded to René. He understood that this was where Mikkell and I would stash our *ticks* and return for the water packs. We walked back

to the landing zone, located the packs, heaved them onto our shoulders, and returned to the team. Then, we repeated the procedure, hid the water packs and continued our trek to the observation post.

I was already drenched in sweat. This was going to be a long, hard night.

It was going to be hard as hell because every step would be uphill from that point on—sharply uphill. Climbing with just leg power was impossible. I was forced to safety my weapon and leave it dangling from my shoulder strap to free my arms and enable me to pull the 360 pounds of the pack and my body weight upwards. I found footholds one boot at a time and called upon every ounce of strength in every fiber of my legs. My thin pilot gloves were already torn to bits by the sharp rocks.

I looked down the side of the mountain. To lose your balance here would result in certain death. This was beyond my wildest dreams. Memories of the Jaeger Corps selection process raced through my mind: pain, fear, insecurity, and the taste of blood in my mouth. The thin mountain air was affecting me severely now, too. We had only just begun, but already I was reaching the limit of my physical abilities. The Jaeger selection hell made a lot of sense to me, now. It had taught me to work through the pain and carry on even when the body is screaming no.

I stopped for a moment to take a drink of water. A few small stones trickled down past me from above. I froze and held my breath. The stones fell from above Mikkel. I leaned against the cliff, got my weapon ready, and attempted to look up. Was it the enemy? An animal? Nature's whims?

If we were ambushed here, our options were limited. We were stuck on a rock face. An enemy would have an unbeatable advantage. I turned my head and saw the rest of the team about 30 feet below me. Their weapons were pointing up. I listened, but could only hear my hollow and rapid pulse in my ears. Mikkel continued, and I started climbing again. *Come on; get your fat ass up this mountain.*

Another few feet on, we reached a rock platform.

“This is fucking insane,” Mikkel gasped. “Yes,” I mumbled, “but we can comfort ourselves with the fact that we have a couple of water packs to climb back down and pick up, later.”

The night progressed much too fast for comfort. It was crucial that we reach our post before dawn. Proceeding in daylight was out of the question. If we didn't reach our destination before the sun began to rise, the only option would be to seek out a dark place like a hole or a cave, and stay put until darkness reappeared.

We reached the top of yet another knoll, marking our halfway point. Mikkel waved me forward. From behind a rock, we looked at the exact thing we didn't want to see up here: the outline of a small building about 150 feet ahead. Our maps and intelligence had shown no sign of buildings in the vicinity of our route. This was very bad news. Buildings mean people. I relayed the bad news to René, who

emitted an angry grunt.

“We have to investigate that building,” he said. “It’s too close to our observation post. We have to know if it is occupied. Mikkell, Thomas, get up there and check it out. We will cover you from here. Go.”

Mikkell and I discarded our *ticks* and moved toward the building in an arc to avoid the firing line and stay in cover. The building was a clay hut, twenty to twentyfive feet wide, with a flat roof. Our weapons were hot and pointing toward the closed wooden door. I moved slowly on the left-hand side of Mikkell since I was left-handed and fires my weapon from my left shoulder.

We reached the door. It had no handle, but we quickly located the hinges and stood to the opposite side so Mikkell could push or pull it open. Without a sound, he placed a hand on the door. We exchanged nods, and he pushed open the door. Quietly we slipped into the hut and activated the infrared light on our weapons.

No people, just an empty room with a small window, a mattress with a blanket, and a small bowl with a glass beside it on the floor. Local shepherds probably used it to sleep and eat in. Shit. This whole area was full of shepherds, sheep, and goats. We shut the door and returned to the group.

Daylight would arrive in less than an hour, and we were about 300 feet from our lying up position. The five of us were lying flat in a small circle behind some rocks trying to catch our breath and regain some energy after what had turned out to be the infiltration of our lives.

“Okay, listen up,” René whispered. “Mikkell and I will go ahead and check out the conditions. We will be back in an hour. If not, you know the plan.”

As they left, René turned to me with a big grin on his face and asked, “Are you cool, granddad?”

We were actually about the same age, but he enjoyed calling me that.

“Piss off,” I laughed.

Our teammates departed, and the rest of us relished a welcome break. The air was completely still. Not a sound. The sky to the east was brightening. Henrik tapped me on the shoulder and offered half a chocolate bar—a Raider.

“You seem to be doing well. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” he asked.

“Eight years,” I replied. “My body has no idea what the fuck is happening,” I added as I devoured the chocolate.

The knee of my uniform was torn, and I began massaging my knees, which were sore and bloody after continuous knocking and scraping against sharp rocks throughout the night.

René and Mikkell's silhouettes reappeared after about an hour. Reaching us, they collapsed like two sacks of potatoes, looking anguished and exhausted.

“We are in deep shit here,” René whispered. “We found only one place from which we can see the target unobstructed. It's difficult to look back into the base from there. But it's our only option. It will have to do. It is a small ledge, just big enough for an observation post and somewhere to sleep. Questions?”

We knew Mikkell and René had done their utmost and chosen the best option under the circumstances. No questions. The break had stiffened our muscles and joints. I noticed Peter groaning and struggling to sit up. His beard was dripping with water, and he was bent over with his hands in his lap, looking like an old, grumpy bear. Had I not known better, I would have guessed his age at that moment to be somewhere between 70 and 80. But I was too tired to laugh. I was in a hurry. The first light had arrived, and birds were already chirping. The base needed to be secured quickly, and that was my job.

I secured the entrance to our base with a couple of Claymore mines, each one packed with 800 small steel projectiles. I cautiously pushed the detonators into place on top of the mines. To camouflage the claymores, I dug some twigs into the ground in front of them. If the twig were to blow away in the wind, the mine would be visible and our presence compromised. I then scratched a groove in the hard soil, placing the detonation wire inside and covering it with dirt. Now, I'd just need to connect the release mechanism.

The small opening in the rocks where the mines were set up was the only way into the base. Due to the way the rocks were shaped, the first mine could only hit an unwanted guest once he had moved a couple of feet through the opening. This was far from ideal, since we would like an intruding threat eliminated immediately.

Another problem was that we couldn't see the other side of the opening where there was an almost vertical drop of a couple several hundred feet, after which the terrain flattened into a valley with small settlements toward the north and west. To have a full overview in that direction, we'd need a man right out on the edge, but he would be visible. This was a real weakness of the position and made us vulnerable.

Our target was to the south. The terrain dropped away from our base in that direction. The only exception was a small crevice in the rock, which followed the slope of the mountain as it dropped away below. It was our only other way out.

The observation post, where we would take turns keeping the targets under watch, was dangerous in itself. I had observed from a wide variety of places—holes in the ground, bushes, lofts,



and in dark pine forests—but never from a post like the one Mikkel had prepared. Moving with baby steps, I covered the fifteen feet from our base to the observation post, which was less than a foot wide and only just big enough to allow us to lean back against the rock surface. One wrong step would send us hurtling into the abyss. Mikkel had camouflaged the observation post with a piece of fine netting called Bow Flash, which blended perfectly into the mountain. He had also laid out all the essential observation tools: our powerful Swarovski spotting scope, cameras, tripods, a logbook, and a map of the entire area with every crucial focus point and terrain feature. He gave me detailed instructions, showed me the village about a mile to the south, and pointed out all the roads and tracks al-Qaida and the Taliban used. He took the first watch himself, and I returned to the base. I had an hour and 10 minutes before taking over the watch. I knew I should eat, but I was too tired. I just downed some water, collapsed in my sweat-drenched uniform, still holding my weapon, and slipped into a deep sleep.

Normally, I'm a light sleeper and react promptly to the slightest sound. But my physical exhaustion had sent me into a strange, deep sleep where fragments of color, sound, smell, faces, and moments were dug from the farthest reaches of my subconscious and exploded in glimpses before my inner eye. I was in a distant place and pretty confused when Mikkel grabbed me by the shoulder.

"Thomas, it's your watch. Are you awake?" I sat up with a start and stared absentmindedly at him.

"Yes, I'm awake. Give me a minute and I will be there." My voice was hoarse and rusty, and I doubt that Mikkel understood what I was saying. But he turned away and crawled back out to the post. I put on my vest, packed my sleeping pad away, checked that my pack was ready, and checked my weapon. I had managed to shake off the sleep and was ready to go. An hour's sleep had made a world's difference.

I waved Mikkel in from the ledge. He stated there had been no activity in the village or on the tracks and roads. I sat on the small piece of sleeping pad at the observation post and studied the area for a long time through the Swarovski scope.

The village beneath me consisted of 14-15 single-family houses, all made of clay and enclosed behind the concrete walls that nearly all Afghan homes had. Afghan men tended to shield their wives and children from the outside world, trying to prevent people outside of the family from even seeing them. A gravel road lead through the village and an approximately fifteen-foot-wide river weaved through the fields west of the settlement. At this time of year, a lot of melted ice water ran off the mountains and into the river and the small irrigation canals, giving life to the cultivated areas around the village.

The time was 8:30 a.m. and, strangely, no one was working in the fields. The only sign of life

was a herd of goats, bound to a tree in the western part of the village. Mountains towered up from the Pakistani side of the border in the south. A myriad of valleys ran through them. At the bottom of the valleys furthest to the east, gravel tracks and roads used by al-Qaida and the Taliban at night ran parallel with small creeks.

I searched for anything that stood out from what one would expect to see in an Afghan village. I had been in many of them and had a good impression of what they ought not to contain. For example, antennas, satellite dishes, phones, Toyota pickup trucks with metal stands designed to carry weapons on the back, donkeys carrying excessive loads, and groups of armed, young men moving in and out of buildings.

Just after 9 a.m., two men stepped out of one of the bigger buildings in the village. They were dressed in loose, brown robes, and walked slowly to the small grove of trees where the goats were tied up. They sat in the shade, leaning up against a tree, and began conversing. I noted it in the logbook. It was the only activity on this watch.

Upon returning to our tiny base, I found myself astounded by the guys on my team yet again. They had made the base almost vanish into our surroundings. Sandy camouflage nets padded with branches had been tied in an arc over the small area. They had even placed stones around the edge of the net to avoid shadows between the net and the ground.

It was time to revitalize my battle strength. This was a military expression, which essentially meant to take care of oneself. Eat, sleep, and clean. I put on dry socks and placed the wet, sweaty ones to dry on my shoulders under my tee shirt. This was an old Jaeger trick, and even if it didn't feel that great, it was where the socks dried best. Changing our socks was the only time we were allowed to remove our boots, one at a time.

There were many safety precautions at the base. At no time did you stand up. All unnecessary activity was to be avoided. No superficial communication. Speak only of the operation. Gear must not be left lying around. When you finished using something, it was to be packed away immediately. All rubbish, even the smallest piece of paper or food scrap, was to be put in the designated bag, which each soldier carried in his pack. We always peed in the same place, a crevice in the rock, and when you needed to *go big*, you do it in a bag and put it inside another bag in your pack.

I heated some water, prepared and ate my ration of freeze-dried chicken and rice. Then, I brushed my teeth, swallowing all the toothpaste before finally washing my private parts with a medic swab. I put all the garbage in a bag in my pack and closed it. There was no need to camouflage my face since it was daylight. Our pale faces only needed concealing at night.

Clean and with a full belly, I got comfortable on my bedroll, rested my head on my vest, and took out the waterproof map from my pocket. Once more I studied our location and the surrounding terrain. The four or five houses a mile to the north worried me. Most of all, I was concerned because they were not on the map. What more was missing from the map? I memorized our meeting points once again, returned the map to my pocket, and closed my eyes in the morning sun.

It was dark and I was halfway through my watch on the fifth or sixth night. Our routines had become second nature, and time meandered along like a lazy stream. Our bodies had gone into hibernation. It felt like carrying a dead weight after so many days without physical activity. Just moving seemed an impossible task. I smelled of sweat and ammonia and was covered in a thin layer of greasy dust. The temperature was reaching 85°F in the shade and the daily water ration of five liters simply wasn't enough. My urine was a dark yellow, a telltale sign of dehydration, and I had a constant headache. I was also bitterly regretting wearing my warm Gore-Tex boots. When I changed my socks that morning, both feet were like sponges in desperate need of air. At least they are not hurting. It could have been a lot worse.

What was bad, though, was the dangerous illusion of safety sneaking up on us. It was a feeling that nothing was going to happen, a feeling of familiarity and security, and one that had to be combated constantly. Slacking off on discipline and routines equated to endangering yourself and the team. No matter how safe the situation seemed, no matter how well you thought you knew the area, you still needed to maintain your concentration. Al-Qaida and Taliban were right around the corner, right at the bottom of the mountain, in a village just over a mile from us.

I looked through the thermal spotting scope. The ticking sound of the cooler irritated me. It sounded so loud to me that I feared it could be heard for miles, even though I knew that wasn't possible. Adjusting the zoom, I scanned the village, the roads, and tracks for activity in the same horizontal pattern as I had done hundreds of times before. Raindrops fell on me. And now I could add that to my list of bizarre things I'd experienced in Afghanistan—rain. But I had no time to dwell on it. I froze at what I saw through the scope.

A group of men were walking along a trail from one of the valleys south of the village. I counted 12, all armed with Kalashnikovs. They moved slowly, stopping occasionally, not using flashlights or any lighting. One of the men at the back of the group, much taller than the rest and had his weapon slung over his shoulder, appeared less vigilant than the others. I was guessing he was the group's leader. I took pictures with our digital camera and checked the time. It was 2:43 a.m. The group was clearly on its way across the border from Pakistan. They didn't look like shepherds on their way

home from work. They continued to the village and turned off behind some buildings where I could no longer follow them. The rain fell more heavily and my uniform had become saturated, but I didn't care. I was thrilled with my observations. The long days of observation and waiting had finally been rewarded. There were armed Taliban or al-Qaida forces in the area. It appeared we were on the way to completing our task.

I grappled with the camera equipment, and prepared photos and text for Henrik to send home.

Nothing more happened that night, apart from a scorpion falling out of my sleeping bag. Since that happened, I never failed to shake my sleeping bag, clothes, and boots before using them.

In the days following our first sighting of the armed men, activity in the village grew. Groups of armed men moved in the terrain at night. There was movement in and out of buildings. We radioed these details to KAF. We also reported their work routines in the fields, the number of women, men, and children in the village, the estimated thickness of the concrete walls around the buildings, and sent sketches of the village.

We continued observing and awaiting a message of what would happen to this village. Calling in a couple of F-16s to drop four 2000 pounds bombs on it would be the easiest thing to do. But obviously, that was not an acceptable solution. Innocent villagers that had nothing to do with the Taliban or al-Qaida could be killed. A better solution would be a direct action raid using units from our Task Force. But that would require extensive preparation and a lot of resources. Besides, there had been no indications that such a course was going to be chosen.

It was early morning, and I had just eaten my favorite breakfast—porridge with strawberry flavoring. I was on my way out to the observation post when my heart stopped.

Less than 30 feet from me, two men carrying Kalashnikovs were crawling toward our base.

They clearly couldn't make out what they were seeing, squinting in the morning sun. This was their territory, their backyard, and something didn't look quite right. One of them was clutching his weapon as if he was determined to use it. I had my weapon ready and raised it slowly to point it at them. Using my thumb, I flipped the safety off silently. I was ready to fight.

In my peripheral vision, I could see René and Henrik positioning themselves, their weapons cocked and ready. Without the camouflage netting, the two bearded men would have seen us already. Their clothes were ragged and their leather boots worn. One of them had a black cloth wrapped around his head. Quintessential Taliban. Mikkel reached for the release mechanism for the claymore mines placed at the entrance to the observation post. Another couple of feet and the first mine would hit the first of the two would-be intruders. They each took one more cautious step, prompting Henrik to un-

safety his weapon. At the sound of the faint metallic click, they stiffened. In an instant, they turned and dashed off.

“Fuck!” René yelled. “Get them!”

Mikkel and Henrik leapt out from under the netting and pursued.

“Peter, Thomas, pack up. Now!” René ordered.

The observation post and base had to be broken down urgently. I threw all the vital equipment from the post into a bag, scrambled back to the base, and made sure my pack was ready. I ignored the camouflage netting. It was irrelevant since we’d been found. Besides, it weighed too much. Weight is of paramount importance when fleeing the enemy.

My heart was throbbing. I threw Mikkel’s and Henrik’s half-eaten breakfast into their packs and closed them. In a minute, we were ready to flee.

René ran out through the opening in the rocks. I followed him since Peter was watching the village, which could not, under any circumstances, be let out of sight, even if it was in the opposite direction from where our problem was. Mikkel and Henrik were lying flat on a ledge. René threw himself down beside them.

“Where are those assholes?” he hissed.

“We have no visual on them. They must be flying head over heels down the cliff. It was the only way down. Do you think they were shepherds?” Henrik asked in a hoarse voice.

“Shepherds! What the fuck would someone bring their sheep and goats up here for? If they were shepherds, my ass is a jet ski,” René snapped.

“There they are,” Mikkel exclaimed. They were whipping toward the village. How they got down so quickly was beyond me. But there they were, sprinting toward a small cluster of buildings situated at the highest point in the valley. I took out my small Zeiss binoculars. The middle house had a small tower and three or four masts with colorful flags jutting up. I scanned to the west through the valley with the binoculars and spotted another batch of houses on top of a hill. A tower there had hoisted similar flags.

“René, I will contact KAF,” Henrik said before sliding backwards from his position and inching back to the opening of the base.

“Yes, call KAF and report that we have been compromised. Tell them to prepare to dispatch a QRF.”

A quick reaction force is a unit on standby to help in emergencies such as this. And René wanted them activated. To be picked up by the Chinook before dark was not an option. It was just too dangerous to fly during the day. We could call in jet fighters and direct them via radio to bomb the

enemy. We could also flee. But in full daylight, deep in enemy territory, that would almost guarantee capture and a macabre death. We could be forced to flee, regardless, if we got caught up and pressured into a firefight.

I looked at my watch. It was now 9:54 a.m. This was not good. Eight hours until it got dark. In the daylight, our only advantage was that the base was situated at such a high altitude; it would be difficult to reach for Taliban. But that was it as far as advantages went. We were five men, 250 miles from home, with a feeble amount of firepower. We each had our 5.56 mm C8 rifles (Canadian version of Colts M-4) and a few hand grenades. We also had Peter's 40 mm grenade launcher. But we didn't even have a machine gun, and we are up against an enemy who, in the span of a few hours, could mobilize hundreds of rabid warriors with machine guns and mortars.

A QRF could take several hours to reach us. It might even be too late at that point. Despite that, we delayed calling for a QRF and decided to wait at the base. Mikkel and I observed a group of men in front of the house with the flags. All of them were armed with Kalashnikovs. The two men who had discovered our base and fled were standing in the middle of the group. They were presumably describing what they had seen up on the mountain, eagerly gesturing and pointing in our direction. One of the men left and entered a house. Another one hurried into the house next door, returning a few seconds later and handing an item to the person who looked to be their leader. He spoke into it. A radio.

At 11:48 a.m., Henrik received a signal from KAF on the radio. Our QRF with 30 armed soldiers from the American 10th Mountain Division were on standby at Bagram Airbase, north of Kabul. From the moment they mobilized, it would take two hours to reach our area.

René grunted and mumbled something, definitely not an expression of his satisfaction.

Henrik had already tuned the radio frequency to the coalition's flying command center, AWACS, which was a large aircraft that managed and delegated all air assets for the forces on the ground. René now wanted Henrik to set the radio to the fighter jet frequency. René was the only Forward Air Controller on our team authorized to call in low-flying fighter jets and direct them to hit targets on the ground.

At 12:32, Peter delivered a disturbing message. New flags in different colors and sizes were being raised on the building's masts. Soon after, the same occurred at the house farther to the west. Apparently, this was how communication worked between the valleys, since handheld radios were unable to reach across the mountains.

The frantic activity continued. I could now count 10-12 bearded men who looked like soldiers preparing for battle. The situation was coming to a head, and René decided it was time for a greeting

from the air. First up, it would be just a show of force so the Taliban would know, upon our instruction, the pilot could drop a thousand pound precision-guided bomb on their heads. René grabbed the radio and made the call.

At 12:48, René handed the radio back to Henrik. He was furious. The fuckwits in the AWACS-craft said there were no fighter jets available. We could try again later, they said. Here we were, stuck in the mountains, asking for help, and suddenly the resources were nowhere to be found. Nobody said anything. The mood was tense. The severity of the situation was etched on our worn-out faces and tired, bloodshot eyes.

At 2:10 p.m., we still hadn't asked for our QRF. René judged that it was not yet necessary. Why had the Taliban fighters below not attacked us yet? Maybe they thought there were more of us up here. Perhaps they were waiting for reinforcements.

At 2:41 p.m., we obtained a message from KAF that unleashed a torrent of verbal abuse from us. Our people at KAF had come up with the outrageous idea that, after dark, we should pack up, move three miles to a new base, and resume our observation of the village. Had they failed to grasp the magnitude of the situation? Had some desk monkey, who probably never left his office, conjured up this monster of a plan while sitting on his fat ass, sipping chilled water?

Despite our near-certain reports that al-Qaida and Taliban were mobilizing forces to hunt us down, we were expected to further penetrate the terrain, which was thick with enemy activity. To top it off, the three miles we needed to travel weren't in a straight line from our position. We would end up covering about seven miles to get there. Assuming we could find a new base without having studied maps or made any preparations was just ridiculous. I wasn't sure who I should fear most at that moment—al-Qaida and Taliban or the enraged men from my own unit?

René blankly rejected the instruction and explained with painstaking diplomacy that he was better positioned to make an informed decision.

At 3:53 p.m., we were informed that there was still no fighter jet support available, but that the Chinook would come and get us at 7 p.m. With some skill and a bit of luck, we would be sitting in the helicopter in three hours.

"Give me the Swarovski," Peter demanded, turning to me with a strained look. "I can't quite see it through my Zeiss, but I think they have reinforcements approaching."

My heart skipped a couple of beats and I quickly fished the bigger scope from my pack. Peter pointed it to the northeast.

"Shit," he mumbled.

The light was weakening, and it was difficult to get a clear picture over such a distance, but

there were definitely 20-25 men moving toward the building with the flags. Moving in our direction. It sent a chill down my spine. This was why they had waited. They were too few to launch an offensive, before. And they knew the timing of their attack would be urgent. They knew we wouldn't be staying up here much longer, that we would either be picked up or receive reinforcements, soon. The next hour was crucial. René made a decision.

“We're out of here. It looks like they mean business. We have an hour before pick-up—half an hour to get to the landing zone, half an hour to keep it under observation. Any questions?”

No questions.

“Then let's get home and eat some steaks,” he laughed. We camouflaged our faces, checked our weapons and equipment, and made sure we had all the vital bits and pieces from the base. Henrik picked up one last message and reported triumphantly that we had been assigned a gunship. Five sickly grins gleamed on our blackened faces. At last we are getting what we had asked for. An AC-130 “Spooky” gunship would arrive in an hour. The specially built C-130 Hercules was ready to back us up with its enormous firepower, including 25mm Gatling machine cannons, a 40mm cannon, and a 105mm howitzer. All we needed to do was point our lasers in the direction of the enemy, and they would be summarily obliterated.

My pack felt heavier than ever on the trip down the mountain. I was dripping with sweat and felt weak; I had lost several pounds of muscle mass after all this time of inactivity. But my strength was suddenly revived as I heard the most beautiful sound: the deep rumbling of the AC-130's four turboprop engines. The aircraft was circling 9000 feet above us. Our situation now felt a lot less bleak. Henrik's soft but excited voice confirmed our position. He informed the AC-130's crew that we appreciated needed their presence.

“Our pleasure, gentlemen,” came the response.

About 600 feet before reaching our extraction point, we stopped. If the enemy detected us at the landing zone, the Chinook wouldn't land. Then, we would be in deep shit. But darkness had settled in, and the zone looked safe, so we continued. We stopped about halfway up the hill and hid in some bushes 60 feet from where the Chinook would land. I glanced impatiently at my watch. It was 6:56 p.m.

“Yes, I have him on the radio. One minute,” Henrik whispered, his voice in the quiet making us jump. “Right, let's do it.”

I brought myself up to a kneeling position and flicked on my NVGs. A powerful light beam ‘burned’ the whole landing zone. I was stunned. The AC-130 was using its infrared projector to mark targets for the gunships weapons and to help the helicopter pilot locate the exact position of the LZ.



I could now hear the faint and comforting sound of the Chinook's double set of blades. We activated the infrared strobes on our helmets and crawled up to the top of the hill. My stomach churned. I was more nervous then than I had been at any point during the operation. If anything went wrong now, it would go terribly wrong.

Materializing out of the empty sky, the Chinook appeared, roaring and loud. It approached at great speed, reared back like a horse to slow down, and transformed the hilltop into a cloud of dirt and sand. The pilot swung the side of the hull toward the hilltop and backed in until the loading ramp almost touched the ground. Small bits of rocks were getting sucked up and hitting the blades, creating a flurry of sparks. The loadmaster blinked an infrared light, signaling for us to board.

I could only glimpse the ramp and could hardly stay upright in the harsh turbulence the blades had created. Stones were flying around, hitting and stinging my face like needles. I fell and landed on my knee. I felt like I was going to black out, but I knew I needed to keep going. Nothing could stop me now. I threw myself on the row of seats in the Chinook's interior with a heart that had never before thumped so hard. I felt a vague sensation of having been rescued, but I didn't feel fully secure until, after some time in the air, the Chinook refueled its almost empty tank from a KC-130R aerial tanker. Only when the tanker left us, and I knew we have enough fuel to get home, did I feel safe. It was a relief like nothing I had ever experienced. I wanted to shut my eyes and go to sleep. But I refrained. We weren't home yet.

A Jaeger never sleeps before he's home.

## **Chapter Eleven: The Mullah has left the building**

We spent the last few days following our operation nurturing our bodies and regaining strength—sleeping, eating, cleaning and washing all of our equipment. We also trained a little, but I'd lost 5 kilos during the operation, so my performance weightlifting was quite poor. And my feet were still pretty bruised and battered after many days of being stuck in my boots without any kind of fresh air. I had athlete's foot on both of them, but I knew it would be over soon with the help of a lot of air and ointment.

Spring had finally arrived at Kandahar Air Field. The sun was shining from a deep blue sky, the heat on its way back to its usual 104°F, and we were getting more accustomed to handling life around the base. Time spent in between operations and tasks could quickly become monotonous with the repetitive daily ingredients: training, shooting, and theory. But as time progressed, we began to socialize more and more with other units in the camp. Almost daily, we would have guests over for dinner in our kitchen and chow hall, where the quality of the food had improved significantly since we'd first arrived. Now, in place of field rations, our chef would occasionally buy steak, potatoes, and salads from the Americans. The entire camp barbecued around the cut-in-half oil barrels situated between our tents and the main building. A load of beer was flown in from Denmark and lightened the mood enormously.

So our chow hall was often humming with activity from Australian, American, and German special operators who enjoyed coming to visit our small, well-organized, and friendly Danish camp. During these visits, we'd share stories from our deployments. The extreme conditions in Afghanistan, with the harsh climate and terrain and a completely unpredictable enemy, was an enormous physical and mental challenge for all of us.

The thin air in altitudes between 9-12000 feet imposed extra demands to the respiratory tract, and as a result, we were constantly dancing on the edge of what our bodies could handle. A fellow Jaeger lost 20 pounds during one operation. Several others had become so exhausted after their missions that they collapsed and were fed liquids through an intravenous drip in the arm. Plus, there were those phases of passiveness at the base that lead to loss in muscle mass and general fatigue. That, in tandem with the constant dehydration, made our conditions that much more difficult.

To operate in teams of five men on a few square feet positioned on a ledge at an altitude of 9-12000 feet is not for the faint hearted. Some teams had been assigned to cover some of the southeastern provinces in February when the mountains were covered in snow. The Jaegers would wear winter uniforms, white tape covered the weapons and they had white bags around their backpacks. They had

even considered bringing skis and poles, but decided against it given their added weight.

The operations were so extreme mentally because it was uncompromisingly fatal to make even one mistake in the mountains. If you fell, you wouldn't just break your leg. You would tumble into the abyss and meet a certain death. That really weighed heavily on the psyche. A Jaeger named Hans, with whom I, some years later, served with on the same team, told me flat out that he had never been as afraid of dying than he had in the Afghan mountains, balancing his 130-pounds heavy backpack as he traversed unsure ground.

Our soldiers also experienced the intense stress of operating deep in hostile territory, hundreds of miles away from the safety of the base. A Jaeger from another team told me about a night operation with his buddy when it had almost gone really wrong. For several days they had been observing houses in a small village, and knew that al-Qaida was using the buildings. So one night, they decided to take a closer look. They were only a few feet from the building when they suddenly heard footsteps behind them. Quickly seeking shelter in a small bush at the side of the path, they saw, at a distance of only six feet, the armed al-Qaida men walking by and into one of the houses.

One evening, our task force was called out on an urgent mission in the middle of supper. The operators of an unmanned U.S. Predator drone had sent an urgent message to the headquarters at KAF: "The mullah has left the building. He is on the move." The Predator had observed a wanted senior Taliban mullah leaving his safe house in one of the southeastern provinces of Afghanistan. The mullah was a former governor and minister under the Taliban regime, and had been on the run since November of 2001. It was the first time that he had been spotted after the downfall of the Taliban regime. Immediately, Robert Harward, commander of the U.S. Navy SEALs and the commanding officer of the task force, assembled the key people on his staff. For half an hour, they planned an operation to capture the mullah, and decided that they needed four Danish Jaeger teams. Unfortunately, my team wasn't included in that count, but within the next half hour, 20 of my closest mates were going to be on the mission. They had to be on the helicopter landing site within a half hour, so there was hectic activity in the tents. Plate carriers needed to be prepared. Ammunition, flare guns, smoke and incendiary grenades, and explosives needed to be packed. Radios needed to be encoded, and data had to be programmed into their handheld GPS systems.

The plan was to have the drone follow the mullah's car from the air and give directions over the radios to the operators of two MH-53m Pave Low transport helicopters and one AH-64A Apache combat helicopter—which, with its guns and rockets, would provide excellent support.

After 25 minutes, the four teams were already standing in front of the darkened helicopters.

Only 20 minutes later, they landed on the small gravel road where the Predator had located the mullah's truck. The Apache helicopter brought the truck to a sudden halt with its powerful searchlights, and hung warningly in front of the terrified mullah and the three other Afghans sitting in the cab of the truck. Twenty Jaeger operatives jumped out, surrounded their vehicle, and apprehended them before searching their truck for vital intel.

The four Afghans were traveling alone and didn't resist, so only two minutes after my mates made their approach, they left in the company of the mullah and his entourage.

It later turned out that the man they'd captured wasn't the mullah he was thought to be. The Predator drone following the mullah had been briefly redirected to another task while shadowing the truck. It must have latched on to the wrong truck when it resumed its pursuit. The four frightened men that had been captured were supplied with water and food rations, and were flown back to their truck.

An error like that was obviously frustrating and embarrassing, but it was simply what happens in an overheated war zone. Luckily, a few weeks later, the real mullah was captured by Americans under intense fire.

The confusion of that operation didn't detract from the great work the Jaegers did, even if they brought home the wrong guy. The whole operation took less than an hour and a half between receiving the order and when they returned to the camp with their captives. They could be proud of that.

I wasn't, and am not, afraid to say that Jaegers were and are amongst the finest operators in the world. We always did very well in international elite military competitions and exercises, and we'd made quite the name for ourselves in the Special Forces world during operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans.

We'd spend a portion of our time at KAF stimulating our competitive sides. Operators of the Jaeger Corps or Frogman Corps are very competitive, so we'd constantly challenge the other elite units. We excelled in foot races and shooting competitions, especially. I worked with many talented elite soldiers from many different countries, but my teammates never failed to impress me. They always performed cool under pressure, were smart, and creative. Oddly, much of that creativity and vigorous tenacity stemmed from the fact that we were, by comparison to our brethren from American, British, Scandinavian, and German units, a small unit with a lot fewer resources at our disposal.

Of course, there were internal rivalries between the Jaeger Corps and the Frogman Corps. There were operators on both sides who notoriously despised each other even though our education was equally difficult, and we were quite similar in basic human qualities and values. Personally, I was totally fine with the frogmen as individuals. But the maritime culture was just different from the one you see in army units. The Frogman Corps recruits about half of their men directly from the street,

which means that a significant portion of their operational teams are entirely without military or operational experience at the start.

During periods without internal competitions, training, education, exercises, and operations at KAF, I would try to make myself useful and offer my help the U.S. engineering units busily blowing up unexploded ordnance, UXO, in the desert and around the base. Since they had more than enough stuff to deal with, they happily took me up on my offer. I gave classes on the handling and disposal of mines and UXO to our teams.

Several soldiers from our task force had already been injured or killed by landmines, booby traps, and UXO. A U.S. Navy SEAL was killed at Tarnak Farms in April, 2002. A soldier from the Australian SAS lost his life and another lost part of his foot after stepping on an anti-personnel mine during an operation in a building they thought was safe. My team was actually supposed to be on that operation, but the Australians took over because they were already in the area.

These many accidents lead to some very motivated soldiers signing up for our course. The first few long and hot days we spent emptying large Taliban ammunition depots, often hidden in basements, tunnels, and wells that our task force had found. We moved tons of anti-tank mines, mortar grenades, and small-arms ammunition to a deserted area just a few miles south of KAF. We stacked all of it very carefully and placed plastic explosives on the sides and top of the pile. We called this a bulk demolition. From a few miles away, we activated the explosives with small radio transmitters, sat back, and enjoyed the sight of the enemy's ammunition erupting in a large mushroom-shaped cloud over the desert.

But there were also some dark times in the camp. One early April morning, I was woken up by a series of deep and hollow noises coming from somewhere just outside the camp. It wasn't unusual to hear sounds like this, since the engineering units were blowing up UXO around the base almost daily, but they usually did it quite precisely around 12 p.m., and once again around 5 p.m.

It was 6:30 a.m. I was half-asleep, and didn't really give it another thought until the entire camp was called together a few hours later and informed of some very sad news. Two U.S. F-16 fighter planes had mistakenly dropped laser-guided bombs on a Canadian infantry company out for gun practice at Tarnak Farms. Four of the soldiers were dead, and eight were seriously injured.

This kind of mistake was called friendly fire or blue-on-blue. It was just one of the many incredible tragedies that war brings with it. To die as a result of fire from one's own units should not be possible, but sometimes it occurred anyway. It was the sort of thing that brings the flag to half-mast and cripples troop morale. It was one of those days that made me tired of my job.



## Chapter Twelve: Security for Europe

As one filled with memories of Afghanistan's black-clad warriors, brown sandstorms, and white mountain peaks, Copenhagen seemed, to put it mildly, a little bland—hardly as exotic or chaotic. And very safe.

A bit more than a half year after my return from Kandahar, my team and I were in the final preparations for an important European Union (EU) summit in Copenhagen. About 4000 police officers, police SWAT units, units from the army, the Frogman Corps, and the Jaeger Corps were all responsible for the event's security. Officers from all over the country had, in the preceding months, been trained to handle violent demonstrations, and the police had been handed blank checks to cover any additional costs associated with the preparations. News of the most recent EU summits was quite scary. There had been many violent clashes between police and demonstrators. A year before, in Gothenburg—Sweden's second largest city—the police had attempted to present themselves with an outstretched hand and a desire for dialogue. At the G8 summit in Geneva, the police took the opposite approach, forming an iron ring around the city and taking an aggressive stance. In both cases, things went horribly wrong.

Now, here in Copenhagen, the police wanted to create a healthy balance between dialogue and a “firm hand” toward the demonstrators. But if trouble should still arise, the police needed to be able to handle large amounts of arrests, and for that purpose, they installed wire cages at several police stations for added space. The number of participants at this summit was going to be large. Most of Copenhagen's hotels were filled up, and they all needed to be guarded in varying degrees. All Jaeger operatives were called in for the job. Our task was, amongst other things, to prepare evacuation routes from the politicians' hotel rooms up to the roofs in case of terrorism, fire, or other incidents requiring a quick exit.

In the weeks leading up to the summit, we spent a lot of hours up on the roofs over the capital. We were also all trained in smoke diving in case of a fire, and had breathing equipment ready so we'd be able to navigate smoky corridors and still evacuate our important guests.

We prepared evacuation routes down from the roofs with ropes that could get the guests down to the street. We prepared harnesses that we could quickly strap to the guests so they could be lifted up into helicopters. In other hotels we attached explosives to all the antennas so we could blow them up quickly and keep the blades of rescue helicopters from striking them, allowing the craft to get so close to the roof, we'd only need to lift people on board. But on most hotel roofs the helicopters couldn't land anyway because they were too heavy for the building to support.

We also had to think about our own security up on the roofs. If we got into a life-threatening situation and all other options had been exhausted, we had one last joker up our sleeve. We packed our parachutes up in a certain way so they would release faster than usual, allowing us to actually jump from the hotel roofs. This is normally referred to as base-jumping, and some Jaegers would voluntarily practice this in their spare time. Base-jumping is incredibly risky, partly given the modest heights of the hotels, partly because of the unpredictable and often turbulent wind conditions between tall buildings in a city.

During the summit, all our available helicopters were ready for action. The old and faithful S-61 rescue helicopters, the navy's Lynx helicopters, and the army's much smaller Fennecs were standing by. And next to them, the Jaeger teams that functioned both as smoke divers and direct-action units could fast-rope down onto the hotel roofs to back up the police's SWAT teams. The docks and canals were patrolled by the Frogman Corps divers and fast RIB boats.

The summit was attended by about 15,000 "anti-globalization activists" from all around the world, but despite minor demonstrations and riots, there was no real drama, and no need for the Jaeger Corps. So we just spent three days on standby in hotel rooms and military installations. Politically, the summit decided to let 10 new countries into the EU. People who know more about that kind of stuff seemed to think this was both a political and organizational success. Politics don't interest me; I just know it was a security success.



[Insert image 1]

1. Rasmus and I in the British EH101 helicopter before take off.

[Insert images 2 and 3]

2+3. The images are taken from a height of 9000 feet from the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) RQ-7 Shadow, from which the teams get crucial messages and information during the operation. In the first image you see that the helicopter has dropped us off – the team is the dots to the left of the helicopter in the middle of the image. In the next image the rocket-cache is exploding.

[insert image 6-2]

4. We begin 94 candidates at the Patrol Course class in 1990. Nine weeks in and we are down to 38 – I'm sitting in the middle row, number six from the left – but only 25 of us graduate “very satisfactory” and are allowed to continue on Selection Course. Of these 8 will become Jaegers

[insert image 7]

5. This is what a Jaeger looks like when performing the specific oxygen jump HAHO or HALO.

[insert image 9]

6. Abductions are such a massive problem in Chechnya that an entire 1300 people were kidnapped between 1996 and 1999. Here is a mother with a picture of her son and his girlfriend in front of her face. The son and the girlfriend have presumably been abducted.

[insert image 10]

7. The completely bombarded ghost town of Grozny in Chechnya in 2001.

[insert image 11]

8. I've only been out of the car for a mere moment before the Russian special forces soldiers become nervous and get me back inside.

[insert image 13]

9. My DDG colleagues Rasmus and Daniel and myself on the right, sitting on a bombarded Russian T55 tank close to a minefield just outside of Kabul.

[insert images 14 and 15]

10 + 11. A little selection of the many unexploded types of ordnance that we find everywhere in Afghanistan. Here are some different versions of the popular mortar-grenade and also a good old-fashioned hand grenade.

[insert image 16]

12. A typical street in an Afghan village. The locals tread around the red stones and flags, which warn about mines.

[insert image 17]

13. A de-miner protected by a kevlar vest and visor working in the minefields outside of Kabul in 2001. That the country is basically an ammunition junkyard, is demonstrated by the rusty tank grenade in front of the de-miner.

[insert image 18]

14. An anti-personnel mine uncovered in the Afghan soil. The size is illustrated in comparison to my Leatherman multitool. On top of the mine you can just glimpse the triggering Bakelite plate.

[insert image 19]

15. The local deminer who lost half of his left hand working in the minefield.

[insert image 20]

16. Selma gets her life's first bath an hour after I find her (she has never gotten used to it).

[insert image 21]

17. Sitting on the far left – I'm the only one with *white face* and no beard – when I as a representative for the Danish Demining Group entrusted the cleaned minefields in the Ghazni province to the local Taliban province governor, who is sitting to the left of the man in the purple jacket.

[insert image 22]

18. In a class in Eritrea I'm preparing the destruction of an unexploded aircraft bomb.

[insert image 23]

19. A team of Danish Jaeger operatives from the Task Force K-Bar, returning home to base after an operation. (Image: Jægerkorpset)

[insert image 24]

20. A pretty common view of the ground around KAF. Lots of unexploded ordnance. The objects resembling pineapples are Russian anti-personnel mines.

[insert image 25]

21. The team tent at KAF with my bed literally in the middle. Privacy is very limited.

[insert image 26]

22. Task Force Ferret's area of the camp at KAF. Our "K-Bar" can be seen to the left in the middle of the picture. The barrier in the street is put up to create a safe distance to the satellite receiver to the far left.

[insert image 27]

23. Breaching walls at Tarnak Farms.

[insert image 28]

24. Fastrope training at Kandahar airfield from a MH-47D Chinook helicopter from the 160th Operations Aviation Regiment – the Night Stalkers.

[insert image 29]

25. Getting ready for operation QA05. I'm in the middle, though not with the full package in my backpack, which eventually will weigh 140 pounds. The team-scout, Mikkel, prefers a suppressor on his rifle.

[insert image 30]

26. The Chinook's Gatling Minigun. It's positioned just beside me and gives me a scare during the insertion.

[insert image 31]

27. The observation base with a view over the mountains and the boarder to Pakistan, which is located to the left behind the camouflaging net. The picture is taken from the very observation stand. The "mill" that is visible behind the net is the satellite antenna.

[insert image 32]

28. Our observation post during the operation. Notice the telescope sticking out of the camouflaging Blow Flash-net which is secured to the rock with a rope.

[insert image 33]

29. The observation post from the inside the hidesite.

[insert image 34]

30. The village that we are observing, seen through a telescope.

[insert image 35]

31. We took this picture with a camera through the thermal telescope in the pitch black night. It reveals a sentry on a roof in the village.

[insert images 36 and 37]

32 + 33. One of the houses that the Taliban and al-Qaeda use to send flag signals to the nearest village, and the entrance to one of the-caves where the al-Qaeda warriors hide.

35. The extremely hard infiltrations in the impassable Afghan mountain's thin air means that is isn't unusual having to get fluids via an IV drip like in the picture. Then the paramedic gets to work.

[insert image 39]

35. The extremely hard infiltrations in the impassable Afghan mountain's thin air means that is isn't unusual having to get fluids via an IV drip like in the picture. Then the paramedic gets to work.

[insert image 40]

36. We operate so high up in the mountains that some teams lie in the snow and infiltrate in winter camouflage. It doesn't happen to my team, since it is too hot whilst we're up there.

[insert image 41]

37. The boot of an Australian SAS operator, who gets half of his foot blown off by a an anti-personnel mine that isn't any bigger than the bottom of a soda can.

[insert image 43 and 44]

38 + 39. Above: The Danish ambassador in Iraq, Mr. Torben Gettermann, in the middle next to me, surrounded by his bodyguards in Baghdad. The picture is taken on Saddam Hussein's old parade ground at the Great Celebration Square. Below: Mr. Gettermann in a bulletproof vest. I'm wearing mine underneath my shirt and a H&K USP 9mm gun on my left thigh.

[insert image 45]

40. The picture was taken under highest alert, during a meeting for EU-ambassadors, while I'm guarding the roof of the Danish embassy in Baghdad. You can see the Tigris in the background.

[insert image 47]

41. In the picture our ambassador's new service car as we like to call "The Beast" is loaded back home in Denmark. An armored Mercedes S600 with 500 horsepower, 12 cylinders. It is proven to be useless later on in Baghdad though, because of the high central reservations that it can't pass.

[insert image 48]

42. A Toyota Land Cruiser after being hit by a roadside bomb.

[insert image 49]

43. Gimp-training on the shooting range in Baghdad. The gimp is the one who sits backwards and ready to fight when we drive around the city's dangerous streets.

[insert image 50]

44. The ambassador at work. The Danish ambassador in Iraq, Mr. Torben Gettermann, on dog watch with Maggie.

[insert image 51]

45. Maggie has gotten big and functions as an extra guard at the embassy. I'm about to get ready for a trip as a gimp.

46. In the middle the stretch of road "Irish" in between Baghdad airport and The Green Zone with the Danish embassy close to the river Tigris.

[insert image 52]

47. Route "Irish" from The Green Zone to the airport is being attacked 10-15 times daily in the period of 2003-2006. Notice the guardrail that has been blown to pieces on both sides of the road.

[insert image 54]

48. Jessica is a captain in United States Marine Corps and also my steady date for a year, in Baghdad

but also in Berlin, where this picture is taken on a vacation.

[insert image 55]

49. Bodyguards dressed up as local Afghans with myself on the far right. Our bulletproof vests are merely peaking out from under our outfits.

## Chapter Thirteen: Bodyguard in Baghdad

The embassy looked more like a fortress than a house. Over the course of the previous six weeks, we had worked hard to prepare the 20,000-square foot house for its new role. Up until a year before, it had been just an ordinary house owned by a wealthy Iraqi family in one of the city's richest neighborhoods. It had been reborn as the Danish embassy of a real war zone in one of the world's most dangerous cities: Baghdad.

We built a nine-foot-high wall to surround the entire site, which could withstand heavy fire from mortars and rockets. We couldn't guard ourselves completely against suicide bombers approaching from the road, but the wall would certainly dampen the effect immensely. The only things disrupting the massive wall were two heavy steel gates and one metal door, which comprised the only entrance to the embassy grounds. We'd added a small passage from the front door to the gates, which resembled an elongated cage leading up to the house's entrance. It was to be used by people running official errands—visa applications and the like.

A technician was in the process of installing cameras in all four corners of the embassy so there wouldn't be a single inch of the grounds we couldn't monitor from inside the building at any time during the day. Big searchlights had been installed on the wall and the roof to illuminate the garden, driveway, and the road when darkness set in. A gigantic generator had been set up in the garage so the daily blackouts brought on by Baghdad's very insecure power grid wouldn't make our lives miserable. Additionally, all the windows had been taped up with a layer of anti-blast film so they wouldn't shatter from the pressure of possible bomb detonations.

Under the hot sun, we filled sandbags and dragged them, together with cement blocks, onto the terrace and the flat roof, where we'd arranged battle positions with machine guns and rockets. We were a team of eight Jaeger operatives in service as bodyguards. It was the first time Danish soldiers had been given such an assignment under such adverse conditions. Prior to the mission, we had two months of comprehensive and intensive training consisting of shooting practice, driving courses, close combat and procedure training. Last but not least, we also trained to develop a bodyguard's mindset. As Jaegers, we were trained to seek out the enemy, identify him, and possibly destroy him. But as bodyguards, our goal became avoiding contact with the enemy altogether. If we were to get into a situation where we faced enemy aggression, our first priority was to get away from the attackers as soon as possible. Defeating the enemy was not a priority, nor was it relevant how many enemies we killed. If we were attacked, it wasn't a question of defeating the invaders. Our only goal was saving our VIP and evacuating him to a safe place.

Our VIP was the Danish ambassador Torben Gettermann. He was the guy we were there to protect while he worked to rebuild Iraq. He set up both diplomatic and commercial relations between Iraq and Denmark, and advised the Iraqis on how best to bolster their fledgling democracy.

If we were attacked, his closest bodyguard would act as a human shield while the others made a tight circle around him. He would then be forced into cover, whereupon we would, if necessary, shoot a clear path to our vehicles so we could remove him completely from the area. Our only criteria for success was that Torben stayed alive. No matter what kind of attacks or attempts of assassination were to occur, we had to save him. His survival was our one and only objective.

Gettermann was in his early 50s, married, had three children, and had previously been stationed in Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Hungary, and Greece. He was a very likeable and sociable gentleman, which all of us in his close-protection detail really respected and appreciated. A VIP could be a difficult and egocentric prima donna who either wouldn't listen or would directly oppose our safety protocols. Torben was quite the opposite. He was wise and one of the lowest-maintenance people I have met. He fully understood that we knew more about his safety than he did, and as a result, always listened carefully and respected our decisions regarding his whereabouts around the Baghdad ministries, official institutions, and embassies.

My team of Jaegers was made up of a bunch of energetic, talented, and sociable guys—all a pleasure to be around. Every day we'd run and lift weights together. We were all in excellent shape, so we'd push each other hard. We spent our free time at night reading, watching movies, or chatting and drinking Coke on the embassy roof, which had a great view over the 1200-miles-long river Tigris that flowed through the city. The roof was a nice cool place in one of the world's hottest cities, the center of the Iraqi shrub steppe that came with a 120°F heat during most days of the summer.

We recruited a large number of local guards to supervise and inspect the embassy's guests, and also to guard the embassy grounds. Many of them didn't know a thing about weapons, so we knew we'd need to train them from scratch how to handle and shoot a Kalashnikov. We spent a lot of time training those guys. We knew almost nothing about them or their backgrounds, so we couldn't rely on them completely and had to check on them constantly to see whether they were performing their work properly. Even at night, we always had one of us there to supervise them.

We also kept a wary eye on the socio-political climate in Baghdad. In our operation room we had computers, printers, and numerous maps of the city and Iraq. It was also in that room where we kept the entirety of our secret and encrypted communication and radio equipment locked up in large boxes. It was from that room where we structured incoming information that could affect our behavior as bodyguards. What bloody battles were being fought between units from the coalition and hostile

militias and where they were taking place, where the staggering number of roadside bombs, ambushes, mortar and rocket attacks were striking, all these factors influenced our decisions when planning routes and destinations on our daily trips through the deadly streets and alleys of Baghdad's red zone, which covered nearly all of Baghdad. The only relatively safe zone was the green zone. It was an approximately 7-square-miles, fenced, and heavily guarded area that was home to the coalition force's leaders, as well as most foreigners and journalists in the city.

Our cars had undergone a transformation. Our heavily armored Toyota Land Cruiser and Mercedes 600—the latter with a 500-horsepower engine, so we called it the Beast—were equipped with run-flat tires, which allowed the vehicles to continue a significant distance on a flat tire. They were also packed with electronic equipment such as a GPS, satellite communication, long-distance radios, and electronic jammers to defend against roadside bombs that might be activated remotely by cell phone.

We had also disconnected all the airbags in case we had to use the car to ram something. Many bodyguards had, in the past, been stopped and blocked by enemy cars coming out of small alleys. We would be able to penetrate such barriers so long as the airbags didn't go off and obstruct our view or break the hand or arm of the car's driver.

Of course, we had very clear rules about driving in the city, and in case of an emergency, we had also prepared evacuation plans both out of Baghdad and entirely out of the country. We installed a small safe room in the embassy with enough supplies to keep us going for weeks if the need arose. Again and again we rehearsed procedures down to the smallest detail. At a nearby open lot, we practiced simulated attacks from roadside bombs, where we had to change vehicles under enemy fire. We timed ourselves changing tires on the armored vehicles. We also ran emergency drills at night so that each one of us learned to perform our role and responsibilities even when half asleep.

Whenever we had the ambassador with us and were driving through the red zone, I had the exclusive pleasure of being the team's "gimp," a name taken from Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction*, where a leather-clad madman, the gimp, is heaved up out of a coffin for "special" occasions. Not that I was mad or dressed in leather, but the situation in the back of the Land Cruiser was pretty much as cramped and uncomfortable as being in a coffin. As the gimp, it was my responsibility to secure our rear while we drove and defeat threats that might approach us from behind. Despite the cramped space, I carefully decorated my tiny battle position with a machine gun, smoke grenades, hand grenades, rockets, and an arsenal of ammunition.

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Less than a year had passed since dictator Saddam Hussein ruled the country with a bloody iron fist. For 24 years, he tortured and murdered his followers based only on vague suspicions and pure vindictiveness. Saddam Hussein was the son of a widow and was raised by a cruel uncle whose political role model was Adolf Hitler. It was a childhood marked by daily beatings, which undoubtedly pushed Saddam to become the most brutal bully of the neighborhood. It was said that he proudly committed his first murder at the age of 14. Early in his youth, he enrolled in the Baath party, an organization that initially worked for pan-Arabism, socialism, and economic modernization. The young and ambitious man made himself useful as the party's ruthless assassin. In 1959, the 22-year-old Hussein attempted to kill the country's leader, Abdul Karim Qassim. The assassination was amateurishly planned and executed, and Qassim was only wounded in the arm and shoulder. Saddam had to flee the country with a bullet in his thigh.

After four years of exile in Beirut, Lebanon, and Cairo, Egypt, he returned to Iraq in 1963, when the Baath Party managed to kill Qassim and became part of the government for the first time—apparently with American support. The following year, the new Iraqi leader, Abdul Salam Arif, put several Baath loyalists in jail, including Saddam. He fled the country again, returning in 1967 just in time for the Baath party's move to power in the following year. Saddam became vice president under his cousin, Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr. He ascended to the presidency in 1979, and wasted no time establishing a dictatorship, oppressing many areas of the heretofore well-functioning and prosperous Iraq. The following year, he sent hundreds of thousands of young Iraqi men across the border to Iran. It was the beginning of a war that lasted for eight years and cost one million lives. Saddam somehow managed to escape the bloodbath, still in charge, without losing face. That could be attributed to the oil-rich mini-state of Kuwait in the south and the support of the Americans, who saw Saddam as a lesser evil than the theocracy in Iran. Saddam was perceived as necessary to maintain a balance of power in the Middle East.

After the war against Iran, Iraq's economy was on the brink of collapse. Saddam thought he could solve this problem by invading Kuwait on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1990. He expected the U.S. would support his invasion, and threatened terrorist strikes against countries that opposed him.

But Saddam had miscalculated. Instead of supporting him, the Americans and the majority of the Western and Arab world turned against him. In January 1991, Operation Desert Storm launched, and the first Gulf War became a reality. Saddam's army was clearly defeated and sent back to Baghdad after only six weeks.

But the Americans did not depose Saddam, which many today consider a strategic blunder

because, despite a decade of international sanctions, some of which forced Iraq to its knees, Saddam managed to maintain his position of power as the country's absolute first man. Together with his sons Uday and Qusai, he led a bizarre life full of luxury, rape, torture, and sudden death, working to anger the world throughout the 1990s by playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse with the UN inspectors sent to the country to ensure his weapons of mass destruction were destroyed as promised. It did ostensibly appear as though they'd been destroyed, but Saddam left the impression that he was still in the possession of WMD. In a fit of megalomania, he said he would demonstrate that he wasn't afraid of challenging the world's only superpower, the United States of America.

It all came to a head on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Without UN approval, 248,000 American, 45,000 British, 2,000 Australian, and 194 Polish soldiers, supported by the Danish submarine "the Seal," invaded Iraq. I personally trained for months with my Jaeger comrades to participate in the operation, but the government shook its head at the last minute, and our task force was unfortunately cancelled.

The purpose of the invasion was simple: Eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, end Saddam's support of terrorist organizations, and liberate its people from a corrupt dictator who had gleefully committed mass murder against his own people.

It had been proven that, in 1988, together with his cousin "Chemical Ali," Saddam had planned and implemented the al-Anfal campaign against the Kurds in the northern part of the country.

Anfal means payback.

Payback using chemical weapons to kill more than 80,000 Kurds in 200 villages.

The second Gulf War was over even faster than the first. Saddam's many military divisions were completely annihilated by the morally and technologically superior American and British forces. Not even the high-profile Republican guards proved to be worthwhile opposition. Saddam was last seen publicly on his way out of Baghdad in a taxi, while his information minister, "Chemical Ali," declared on various global networks—while obviously intoxicated by opiates—that victory was imminent for the heroic Iraqi forces.

The coalition formed against Saddam's forces was comprised of soldiers from 36 countries. Later that year, Denmark sent a battalion of around 700 soldiers to Basra in the southern part of the country, where they set to work supporting the British forces.

Nine months after the invasion, Saddam was humiliated, pulled out of a hole in the ground, long-bearded and ragged, and was thrown in jail immediately.

An Iraqi special court prosecuted and charged him for mass murder of his own people and crimes against humanity. He was executed by hanging on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2006 and the world was freed of one of its worst tyrants. Unfortunately, the euphoria of the coalition's convincing victory in 2003

was very short lived. Within one year of the invasion and the removal of Saddam, Baghdad had become a very dangerous place with the most chaotic kinds of security problems.

During the invasion, Iraq was a battleground for two parties, each facing a visible enemy. Now, we had entered a completely different kind of battlefield with an enemy that was often invisible, unpredictable, and unscrupulous. Ours was an enemy that would stop at nothing to jeopardize the coalition's effort to rebuild the collapsed Iraqi state. They were an enemy that played by an entirely different set of rules. At the forefront of the conflict were the supporters of Saddam's Baath party, as well as Islamist and Shia Muslim parties, who had organized themselves into a resistance movement. Additionally, there were groups of foreign fighters, typically from al-Qaida, who had arrived to fight their jihad—holy war.

These enemies accounted for more than 900 American soldiers killed within one year of the invasion. One can't disregard the thousands of wounded to add to that figure. Within the first eight weeks of our arrival, about 200 U.S. soldiers had been killed, more than half of them in Baghdad alone. Moreover, approximately 14,000 Iraqi civilians, again over half of them in Baghdad, were killed as a result of the invasion and the subsequent fighting between the coalition and the hostile parties. The opposition wasn't exclusively comprised of religious fundamentalists or militants. They also faced criminal gangs, who saw their chance to exploit the time of lawlessness following the invasion.

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The last few days had been extremely busy since Torben Gettermann had a steady stream of meetings in the red zone. In contrast to that, the night had been relatively quiet, with only a single mortar grenade going off a few hundred feet from the embassy. That had still been enough to have us all tumbling out of bed to get Torben into our safe room on the ground floor.

That day, we'd planned on doing little more than exercising and relaxing in the shade of the garden. But first we had to make a stop at a checkpoint two miles away to pick up some Iraqi handymen who worked at the embassy. They didn't have green-zone access unless one of us came to get them and channel them through the tight security at the U.S. checkpoint.

It was 9:55 a.m., and the handymen were supposed to be there at 10:00, but my damned radio wasn't accepting my code. Every bodyguard carried a radio with a top-secret code to make it impossible to listen in on or understand our radio communications. We could not, under any circumstances, leave the premises of the embassy unless our radios were first encrypted.

Finally, my radio accepted my code and I did a radio check with my Jaeger teammates Kenneth

and Christian, two experienced operators I'd grown to be close friends with during that time. A few minutes behind, the Land Cruiser was on its way out of the embassy's heavy metal gates. Our local guards always helped to secure our exit by walking into the road and stopping all traffic a few paces from the gates so nobody could force their way into the embassy.

Since we were only making a short stop in the green zone, there were only the three of us in one vehicle. When we traveled into the red zone, we always traveled in at least two vehicles with a minimum of two men in each.

Along our way to the checkpoint, we passed the big parade ground with its gigantic crossed swords, the place where Saddam used to sit and watch through the thick smoke of his always-lit cigar his many thousands of marching soldiers and military vehicles in their annual parade. We continued past the big pretentious houses and palaces with their huge gardens that once belonged to the Iraqi elite, but were now either abandoned or used by the coalition's many administrative units.

At the checkpoint, it was hectic as always. Many Iraqis were employed in various jobs in the coalition's administration, and were in and out of the checkpoint every day. The checkpoint itself consisted of an entrance gate for guests and a zigzag-shaped gate for vehicles surrounded by high concrete blocks, called T-bones. The security at the checkpoint was thorough. Everyone on foot was searched with metal detectors and checked for valid identification. Vigilant and heavily equipped U.S. soldiers opened all vehicles and searched them for weapons and bombs, checking underneath the engine compartment with the help of mirrors to see if there were any suspicious objects hidden. There was also a 63-ton American M1-A2 Abrams tank parked about 150 feet down the street, the crew keeping a close eye on the checkpoint. With its 120mm gun aimed directly at the vehicle lane, it could pulverize suicide bombers trying to make a run for it in under a second. In addition to all that, there were a myriad of machine guns sticking out in all directions behind a massive concrete wall surrounding the checkpoint.

Kenneth was driving and I was sitting in the passenger seat. I was to be the one to make contact with the Americans and get our three handymen into the car. Kenneth parked about 75 feet away from the checkpoint, because it was too risky to park right next to it. Wearing my plate carrier and armed with my USP 9mm pistol, I opened the door, stepped out into the boiling heat, and walked toward the checkpoint.

I had barely crossed the front of the Land Cruiser when a powerful flash and a deafening boom tore through the air, a pressure wave shoving me backwards into the car, orange flame shooting up into the sky and enveloping the checkpoint in smoke.

From what I could tell, it must have been a car bomb exploding. For a moment, it felt like

everything was happening in slow motion. A surreal quiet hung on the air at first. But then, all hell broke loose. Screaming, shouting, and crying men and women were fleeing in all directions. I saw an older woman fall to the ground, losing her purse and all its contents while people just jumped over her in fear of becoming a victim. A machine gun was spewing in long bursts and the American soldiers tried to get an overview of the dead and wounded. We were in a very dangerous place. We knew that the enemy often followed up on an initial attack with automatic weapons and rockets, taking advantage of the chaos. We were parked in a regular kill zone. I threw myself back into the car and slammed the door behind me. Kenneth slammed the shifter into reverse, made a sharp 180-degree turn, and blasted away from the checkpoint. My hands were shaking and I was dripping with sweat. It dawned on me how lucky I'd been. I looked down at my radio and was suddenly happy that it didn't accept my code that morning. Had it received it seamlessly, we would have arrived two minutes earlier and I would have been in the middle of the checkpoint when the car bomb went off.

Later, we found out that 15 people died that morning, including three U.S. soldiers. More than 50 were wounded. We also learned that our three handymen weren't even waiting for us on the other side.

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Being a bodyguard can be tedious and monotonous work. I know this from colleagues who work in that industry full time. Some even say that it can be the world's most boring job, simply because you're almost never tested in what you were actually trained to do. Year after year you train for that day, that minute, that second, in which a terrorist, a lunatic, or just a drunkard, bring your VIP's life in danger, and you have to bolt like lightning from a clear sky to mobilize all of your skills and channel them into the right reflex. Your actions should result in life rather than death. Almost no bodyguard ever gets into a situation like that and they know it. It therefore requires an extreme amount of discipline to never lose focus.

Here in Baghdad though, my comrades and I had the advantage of never being bored. Considering where we were and the country's threat level, we could never relax. The threats were real, regardless of where we were or what we were dealing with. Whether it was at home behind the walls of the embassy or in the red zone, we had to be constantly aware of mortars, rockets, and of the high risk of ambushes, roadside IEDs, and suicide bombers. These things happened every day, almost every hour in Baghdad.

The next day, we were scheduled to take a high-risk trip where Torben Gettermann was to be escorted to the Iraqi Foreign Ministry, where he would meet with the foreign minister. It was especially

dicey, because the foreign minister was a Kurd. Iraq has had a strained relationship with the Kurdish minority in the north, who had repeatedly fought for their independence. Additionally, almost the entire staff of the ministry, consisting of about a thousand people, had previously worked for the Kurd-hating Saddam Hussein, and almost all of them were former members of the Baath party.

It had been a year since the last attack on the minister. A bomb had been placed in his office and was set to explode while he was giving a meeting, but he was delayed elsewhere in Baghdad. The bomb exploded in his empty office, and Iraqi and U.S. investigations concluded that a ministry employee—either a guard or an officer—had carried out the attempt. So even within the walls of the ministry, Torben was far from safe. We never brought him to any destination without having conducted a thorough search beforehand.

From the moment we left the embassy until we arrived back home, there were dangers lurking everywhere. Today, I was going to the ministry with our reconnaissance team. But first, we had to find the most appropriate route to get there; only then could we enter the ministry and get an overview of the situation.

We planned the route according to which road was least likely to be ambushed, where there were no imminent threats from roadside or suicide bombs, and where there were fewer checkpoints requiring us to stop the vehicles. The more we stopped, the more vulnerable we became. It was difficult to estimate threats in Baghdad, which, with its 6.5 million inhabitants, is the Arab world's second largest city after Cairo. Up until the 1970s, the city experienced a period of prosperity and growth due to the high price of oil, which was Iraq's main source of export. The city invested in a new infrastructure, including sewer lines, water systems, and highways. But the war against Iran in the 1980s made the conditions rough for the city, when Saddam decided to spend most of the country's money on his army. In addition to that, thousands of city residents were killed as a result of Iranian missile attacks. The first Gulf War also hit the town hard, and the international sanctions imposed throughout the 1990s meant that hardly anything could be rebuilt before the bombings, in connection with the invasion in March 2003, caused further damage to the city. After the invasion followed extensive looting of public buildings, offices, museums, and presidential palaces, and the destruction of symbols of Saddam's regime.

The sight of the city in 2004 was resultantly dominated by rundown roads, decaying buildings, dirty and overcrowded streets, and large slums. In the most notorious of all slums, Sadr City, the Americans were constantly fighting bloody battles with the Iraqi militias.

Besides the roads being rundown, they were also often blocked or choked off to the police's liking. This made it kind of difficult to use maps or GPS. In addition to all of that, people were found

dead in the streets, boulevards, squares, and highways on a daily basis. It was almost impossible to predict anything. However, we did have a set rule that our route to and from our destination could never be the same, and in addition to that, we always looked for an alternative route to take in case we encountered problems along our primary route. That could be an ambush, fights between American and other hostile groups, or even just an ordinary traffic jam. But we tried to never stop and we always knew where the nearest U.S. base was located so we could get there quickly in case of an emergency, or even have injuries treated at the medical facilities that all the American bases had.

When we arrived at the foreign ministry, we introduced ourselves as the bodyguards for the Danish ambassador and ask for permission to inspect the building. We explained that our VIP would be visiting the foreign minister in the near future. For security purposes, we never disclosed the exact date or time we'd be arriving with Torben.

We planned a route from the entrance to the ministry building all the way through the long and winding corridors leading to the foreign minister's office where the meeting would take place. We looked for rooms or places where Torben would be safest in case of a rocket or mortar attack. In case of a fire, suicide bomber, active shooter, or other conditions that required evacuation, we also determined a route for Torben to quickly and safely escape the building. We checked the radio transmissions between the bodyguards and the drivers since the radios didn't always reach through reinforced walls. We'd be in trouble if we suddenly had to evacuate and couldn't communicate with our drivers. They needed to be able to pull up to the exact spot where Torben was exiting within only a few seconds of our exit. He must never stand around waiting to be picked up. Those moments where a VIP is between a building and a collection point are the most critical due to the risk of snipers, suicide bombers, and drive-by shootings.

The following morning, we left the embassy at 9:30 a.m. in the two Land Cruisers, en route to the foreign ministry. Silence reigned as everyone in the car was fully concentrated on the task at hand. Small talk was forbidden in these situations. Torben knew this too, and didn't say a word. The last few days in Baghdad had been very violent and bloody. Suicide bombers and roadside bombs had killed more than 200 Iraqi civilians and 25 U.S. soldiers. The route to the foreign ministry led us through some of those troubled streets and neighborhoods, and although no one was saying anything, there was a tangibly tense atmosphere in the car. As the gimp, I had to report on any threats that might be approaching us from behind. But if I assessed a threat was real, I took initiative with my machine gun or my grenade launcher. I didn't need to ask Michael, our head bodyguard, for permission, first. The most imminent and likely threat was suicide bombers in cars: They would drive up at a very high speed alongside our vehicles before blowing themselves up. These types were driving doomsday machines,

filled with explosives that would kill everyone and everything within a radius of 150-300 feet. Typically the trunk, seats, and floors were lined with explosives. If such a thing were to explode next to us, we would all be killed even though the Land Cruiser was heavily armored. Fortunately, one could usually spot these suicide cars by their risky driving style and the fact that their shock absorbers were fully compressed—the car driving low—due to the heavy weight of the explosives. Furthermore, there was usually only one person in the car. No need to waste two lives.

It was a busy morning in the city. We drove at the highest speed that traffic would allow, and our two drivers zigzagged around the many other cars on the road. Most drivers understood that the easily identifiable bodyguard vehicles didn't want other cars close by. But there were still those drivers who didn't pay any attention. I sat with one hand constantly on the handle of the trunk, ready to open it quickly—my other hand ready on my machine gun—as a warning to cars that were getting too close. If a driver continued to approach without grasping such a warning, I would fire a few shots into the ground in front of their car. If they still didn't get it, I would shoot their engine. If they still persisted, they would receive no more warning and I would open fire on the driver.

We saw a black cloud of smoke rising from up ahead, and we really wanted to get off that street. But there weren't any alleyways, so we had to continue on. We passed a couple of Humvees and a division of American soldiers with M16 rifles, shouting and trying to direct the traffic around a burning SUV. It looked like a bodyguard vehicle that had driven over a roadside bomb. We continued at the highest speed possible away from that spot and crossed the two-lane road of the Al Sinak bridge leading over the Tigris. After about 15 minutes of frantic driving, we arrived at the foreign ministry a couple of minutes before 10 o'clock.

As the point man, I was always the first to exit the car and go directly to the receiving person at the entrance to ensure everything was in order. An elderly gentleman in a dark suit, which I presumed to be the minister's secretary or another senior official, greeted me and let me know that the minister was ready to see us. I reported this over the radio to Michael, who opened the door for Torben. The ambassador had just taken off his bulletproof vest and was quickly striding toward me. I led the entourage through the ministry's long corridors, letting people in front of us know that a VIP was coming through and they should not be in our way.

Torben always moved fast, and I was constantly making sure that there was an adequate distance between myself and the four other bodyguards who were surrounding him. At the same time, I had to have my eyes open for anything that resembled a potential threat—primarily weapons, which were seen in large volumes in all Iraqi ministries and official buildings. I kept an eye out for would-be suicide bombers, identified by their apparent nervousness or an abnormally fast, awkward stride given



the suicide vest they'd wear underneath their normal clothing. Unfortunately, mentally handicapped men, women, and even children were often used as suicide bombers, sent toward a target only to be blown up using a remote-controlled trigger. So there were never any really obvious indicators. Another 50 feet ahead of me, two armed guards caught my eye. Upon a closer look, they seemed pretty dull and apathetic. No threat there. I increased my pace toward the closed door 30 feet ahead, which led into a large hall with balconies all around the first floor. I needed a few extra seconds to screen the room before Torben came through the door. The balconies looked okay, and the hall didn't appear to have any weapons or suspicious people inside. So Torben entered, surrounded by the others, and we continued forward at high speed. The sunlight that streamed through the windows blinded me for a moment, and the surrounding area got out of focus. I quickly pushed my sunglasses from my forehead in front of my eyes.

A young man in baggy white clothing was walking directly toward me at a high speed. He was walking strangely. As the point man, my weapon's safety was always off. I put my finger on the trigger. As he came closer, I could see that he was walking so strangely because he had a limp. Once he noticed that we were bodyguards, he jumped to the side and greeted us politely. No threat. We reached the minister's office, and only one bodyguard followed Torben into the meeting with his gun concealed in his belt. The radio connection with the two Land Cruisers was fine. We reported that everything was okay and that the meeting was in progress.

The conduct of meetings is very different in Iraq than what we are used to in Denmark. It was very common for secretaries or assistants to enter the room during a meeting, because of this or that errand they had to run. And although we had an armed bodyguard in there, we still insisted on searching anyone who wanted to enter the office during the meeting. This sometimes caused loud protest from the party being searched. We would kindly, but firmly, insist we had to perform the search, and they'd reluctantly accept the situation. That day, we stopped an elderly, heavyset man carrying a black briefcase, who apparently had some important business to discuss with the minister. We told him we couldn't let him enter, and he left us, muttering some probably very unflattering Arabic phrases and curse words.

"The meeting is over. We're on our way out," I reported over the radio to our two drivers a little while later, when we were on the way back through the crowded corridors. After exiting the main entrance of the ministry, I spent 10 seconds scanning for any suspicious people or vehicles before letting Torben exit the building. I stood ready at the first car to open the rear passenger door for him. A few seconds later, we were on the road again, en route to the Danish embassy with our precious cargo.

We'd been driving for about 15 minutes when a so-called "cowboy team" approached us from

behind at high speed. Apart from hostile militias, terrorists, and roadside bombs, cowboy teams were what we feared most. These were teams of bodyguards, often Americans, consisting of amateurs looking to make easy money. At best, they were former soldiers, but were still often without any form of bodyguard training. They were the pumped-up macho types who were happy to shoot at anything that moved—other bodyguards, local traffic, or military vehicles, they didn't care. They lacked any kind of command structure, and typically had a sign on the back of their cars with the words *deadly force authorized*, which they were more than happy to follow.

Many innocent Iraqis had fallen victim to these deadly amateurs. Fortunately, there had been fewer of them in the streets given that security companies were realizing their clients didn't want these fools as their bodyguards. But there were still a few remaining. And on the back of the huge American SUV that was fast approaching, I could see a big beefy guy sitting behind a machine gun. He was wearing a skin-tight tee shirt and a bandana instead of a helmet, and was gesticulating at the traffic in front of him, which he clearly wanted out of the way. We could choose to stay put on our side of the road, but it just wasn't worth the risk given the trigger-happy hillbilly behind us. I didn't feel comfortable with the situation, and quickly suggested to Michael that we take our alternative route instead. It led us across the 14<sup>th</sup> of July Bridge, where we were stopped at the U.S. checkpoint. The always-vigilant and professional American infantrymen checked us thoroughly before we crossed the bridge over the Tigris, driving directly into the green zone—the embassy just a stone's throw away.

"Stop the car," Torben shouted suddenly. The driver slammed on the brakes immediately and we all clenched our weapons, thinking something was wrong. It wasn't. Torben just wanted to go and check on something he saw on the side of the road. If this had happened in the red zone, we would have under no circumstances accepted it, but since we were now in the green zone, it was okay. We all got out and followed him to the ditch, where we found a puppy tied to a tree with a tight wire around his neck. There were no people around, and the puppy had clearly been abandoned. It was dehydrated, hungry, and weak. Torben looked at the puppy for a while and then quickly decided that we needed to take him home to the embassy. We cut him free, and the ambassador escorted the dirty piece of fur, who later turned out to be a female, into the car. Back at the embassy, he gave her a bath, lined a cardboard box with cozy blankets, and gave her the name Maggie.

Later that day, we went on another trip through the red zone, this time to the Iraqi Ministry of Integration, where everything went smoothly again. We even had time to squeeze in a workout at the U.S. embassy's large, air-conditioned gym. Our good day came to an end on the embassy's roof, where the temperatures were bearable, drinking cold sodas and a few of our boys smoking their pipes. The sky was lit up every once in a while by machinegun fire. It was either coming from the operations that

the Americans were carrying out each night all over Baghdad, or it was celebratory fire from Iraqi families at weddings or other festive occasions. They'd often shoot up into the air with their Kalashnikovs, and unfortunately, not so rarely, accidentally kill people with their negligently fired rounds.

A few days later, Michael and I were on the roof soaking up some sun before a trip into the red zone. The others were cleaning weapons after the morning's shooting practice, and Torben was working in his office. I was lying on my back and staring up at the blue sky when I suddenly detected two black dots flying over us about 100 or 150 feet above the ground. Michael must also have seen them, because we both jumped up and realized that it was a mortar attack on the green zone. A few seconds later the two grenades hit the ground not more than 150 feet away from the embassy, in two deafening bangs that made the windows of the embassy quiver. I jumped down the stairs to get Torben out of his office and into our safe room on the embassy's ground floor, but he was already being led out by Lars and Christian, who had been in the kitchen. Torben was usually very calm when it came to attacks with rockets or mortars, but these had been very close and he looked nervous. In the following minutes, we heard several detonations in the direction of the American embassy, which was only a mile away from ours, and the next few hours were just one long attack with rockets and mortars.

We were sitting ducks that couldn't do anything apart from keeping our heads down. Every time we tried to get on with our work, a new wave of mortar and rocket attacks began. As long as it happened outside of the embassy walls, we would be fine, but if a mortar or rocket found its way over the wall, it could be fatal.

As the hours went by, we actually managed to adjust ourselves to accept the noise and violence of the attacks. We sat on the floor and played cards with Torben while mortar grenades continued to rain down near the embassy. I noticed that we had grown more concerned with our card game than the mortal danger that surrounded us.

The attack was a coordinated one, multiple militants firing simultaneously to hit the huge U.S. embassy complex. With its several thousand employees housed in one of Saddam's former palaces, the embassy was an inviting target to the enemy. Rebel militias would often fire their rockets and mortars from the streets in the red zone, where the distance to the green zone could still be covered with the range of their weapons. They arrived in trucks, their launchers covered by a tarpaulin, and within a minute or two, they'd fired off all their ordnance and disappeared just as quickly as they came.

Even the Americans, with their sophisticated technology, stood no chance of locating the rebels quickly. They also endured a few losses in that day's attack. A Nepali guard at the embassy was killed when a fragment of a mortar grenade bored through his helmet. An American died instantly when a

122mm BM21 rocket inexplicably didn't detonate when it hit the ground but then went off a minute later after everyone had thought it was a dud.

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Every mission as a bodyguard in Baghdad lasted about two or three months, and after a few months home in the damp and gray Danish winter weather, I found myself actually looking forward to my third mission. I was pleased to return to one of the world's bloodiest hotspots, if only to once again experience the excitement and the brotherhood with my fellow Jaegers.

When I returned to the embassy, everything looked pretty much the same as it had the last time I'd been there. The flowerbeds and the hedges of the garden seemed to be even more neatly cut than before. There were a couple of new guards, whom I greeted politely. They'd purchased two brand new Land Cruisers to replace "the Beast"—it never had the ground clearance to drive up over the high sidewalks and barriers in case of an evacuation. And Maggie had grown. For obvious reasons we didn't know how old she was exactly, but she had to be close to a year old now. She had turned into a lively and very determined lady, and she seemed very happy to see me again. During my previous assignments, I'd spent a lot of time with her. Here in the late winter, with the cool nights of 40-50°F and reaching a pleasant 85°F during the day, we'd spend many hours in the garden where we'd train and play with Maggie.

Torben was in Copenhagen to attend a series of meetings at the foreign ministry, and we were going to pick him up the next day at Baghdad International Airport, otherwise known as BIAP. It was my responsibility to gather information about our enemy in Baghdad prior to the trip.

I mostly got intel from the intelligence department at the American embassy, and passed along what I knew during our daily meetings at our own embassy to the rest of the team. I was also the driver and spent a portion of the day preparing the Land Cruiser, which I was responsible for during the next few trips into the red zone.

All major supply routes in Baghdad had been named by the Americans. Some of the biggest had names like Brewers, Tampa, and Pluto, and were used daily to transport the endless rows of supplies for their 100,000-man war machine.

The highway that ran from the green zone to BIAP was called route Irish. It got its name from the American football team from the University of Notre Dame—the Fighting Irish—and thus followed the tradition in the U.S. military of naming main supply routes after sports teams. Irish was not very long, not even five miles, but in the years between 2003 and 2006, it was described as the most

dangerous stretch of road on the entire planet. Nothing less.

The few miles of highway were the militias' and terrorist groups' favorite spot for attacking coalition forces using roadside bombs, suicide bombers, drive-by shootings, or ambushes. In the past few years, it had led to hundreds of military and civilian casualties, with thousands more wounded. It was not unusual to pay \$20,000 to hire a team of bodyguards to deliver their VIP within a couple of minutes to either the green zone or to BIAP.

There was no way around Irish for the many diplomats, officials, journalists, and others associated with the green zone when going to and coming from BIAP. American Blackhawk helicopters flew the route, but they were reserved for senior VIPs, such as American generals, politicians, and high-ranking diplomats. So that left all of the others to travel the route by car. Some of us traveled it many times a week or even several times a day.

When I was picked up at BIAP the day before by the team that I was here to relieve, we had to wait for three hours. The Americans had closed down Irish; within two hours, there had been three roadside bombs that had gone off and two suicide bombers driving by U.S. military vehicles, killing a number of U.S. soldiers, contractors, and Iraqi civilians. The militias and terrorist groups had started to become even more unscrupulous in the way they carried out their tasks. After a roadside bomb detonated, the dead and wounded had to be evacuated and the American soldiers always called for a medevac helicopter, which was clearly marked with a red cross. According to all known and recognized war conventions, you should never open fire on any vehicle showing the red cross. But the rebels of this war didn't seem to care for any kind of conventions. The militias were often ready with their machine guns and their rocket launchers when the medevac helicopter landed, and would ambush and attack soldiers that were trying to evacuate their dead and wounded.

The rebels also killed dogs and donkeys, just to open them up and fill them with improvised explosive devices and then put them on the roadside, blowing them up when military guards were crossing.

Wireless transmitters, such as mobile phones and small radios, detonated many roadside bombs. Those we could actually interfere with using the Land Cruiser's jammer, which made it possible to disrupt the signals. The problem was, the militias quickly found new frequencies our jammers weren't able to disrupt. And unfortunately, the militias also made a habit of using roadside bombs that were hardwired to a detonator, which made all our sophisticated countermeasures sort of irrelevant.

Our indicators for VBIEDs, vehicle-based improvised explosive devices, weren't so ironclad anymore, either. There had been several examples of suicide bombers bringing along women and children with them so as to not raise suspicion when they drove toward their target.

We waited at the last checkpoint of the green zone before reaching Irish, ready to drive to BIAP and pick up Torben, who'd be arriving in a military plane from Kuwait. The Land Cruiser's jammers were turned on, the radios had been checked, and both cars were loaded with weapons and ammunition.

I took a sip of water and a deep breath, and then I began preparing myself mentally for the intense drive along Irish, which had only just reopened after that morning's killing of two U.S. soldiers, their Humvee destroyed by a roadside bomb.

It was like playing Russian roulette.

We left the checkpoint, and I sped it up to 80 miles per hour. Not too fast, not too slow. We needed to keep our speed down enough to observe our surroundings, but at the same time we also couldn't be too slow, because that would make us an easy target. The heavy armor affected our vehicle's center of gravity, so that it reacted a lot more violently than a standard Land Cruiser. I was constantly trying to anticipate the road, trying to avoid any abrupt twists or turns. The second Land Cruiser drove at the exact same speed only a few feet behind us, so no car could slip between us.

For the first 1500 feet, we drove across a highway bridge, which led us directly into the most crowded part of route Irish, where it was a three-lane road. I kept the car in the middle lane as much as I could. This would reduce the impact of any roadside bomb detonations.

There was a four-door car driving extremely slowly in the middle track about 600 feet ahead of us. After a few seconds, I would have to overtake it. I preferred he move over to the right lane, so I used the blinker a couple of times. No response.

I kept my speed steady, and since I was now only 150 feet away from him, I honked my horn multiple times and used the lights. It finally worked, and he promptly responded by swinging the car over into the right lane. He clearly recognized that the bodyguard vehicles on Irish were no joke.

The first bridge that crossed the road popped up about 1500 feet ahead. Overpasses were always a critical point. Roadside bombs were placed beneath them under the cover of darkness, and the bridges themselves were often used to throw down what were known as "drop-down bombs." When I saw two men moving toward the center of the bridge, I reported it by radio immediately, so the whole team knew about the potential threat. It didn't seem like there was anything to see under the bridge. No people. No dead animals. No suspicious objects. But just before we drove underneath the bridge, I saw that the men stopped moving. I continued under the bridge, but quickly switch to the left lane so I didn't exit on the same track that I came in on. We came out the other side and nothing happened.

I didn't have time to think about the men anymore because 1500-2000 feet ahead, I saw a pillar of smoke rising up from the road. As we came closer, we could see a Land Cruiser engulfed in flames

and black smoke. It was an British bodyguard team that had been hit by a roadside bomb. It had obviously just happened, because there were no signs of life around the car. The second car from the team was parked about 150 feet further down the road. Two bodyguards jumped out wearing helmets, vests, and assault rifles, while two others followed behind with fire extinguishers and raced toward the burning car.

As we drove by, my eyes left the road for a moment. The vehicle's cabin was completely blackened, and smoke and flames stood above the car. If the people inside hadn't been killed by the roadside bomb, they were certainly dead now. Nothing could survive in there.

I thought of those men whose lives had just ended abruptly and violently on a highway in a foreign country, far away from home. And even though the air conditioning was blasting, I felt very sweaty.

We still had to travel another 1,5 mile to reach the checkpoint that led to BIAP. We snuck under another overpass, and skirted two big potholes in the highway's middle lane left behind by mortars. At one mile, I could hear Magnus' voice hiss "I'm opening," on the radio. He was the gimp in the other Land Cruiser, and he meant he was opening the trunk door. A car that was dangerously overtaking a bunch of cars up front seemed suspicious. Magnus had fired warning shots before, and knew exactly when they were needed.

But on this trip, it was enough just to flash the machine gun. The car kept its distance.

As always, it was a relief to reach the heavily guarded American checkpoint, where a large black infantryman received us. He gave the car a look and could already see that we were no threat. He said with a kind, wide smile, "Hey guys, what's up?"

Over the next few weeks, we drove Torben to and from meetings in the red zone almost every day. I was also at the U.S. embassy every morning, where I received intelligence and prognoses for the following days.

I had now worked quite closely with Americans for the past three or four years, and they really impressed me, both as people and as soldiers. They were some of the friendliest, most sociable, helpful, and service-minded individuals I've met. I don't know why the Europeans turn up their noses toward American soldiers. The U.S. military trains the world's best. There's really nothing more to add. In contrast, some Europeans I've come across almost seem sluggish and bitter. Even the once indomitable Brits now seemed somewhat sullen, even a bit soft.

At that moment, the hottest topic in the U.S. intelligence department was the threat in the green zone. This "safe" zone was not as safe as it was before. Over the past several weeks, there had been lots of improvised explosive devices under parked cars and in garbage cans inside the zone. The Americans

were convinced that it was the Iraqis in the area that were smuggling in the explosives, and naturally everyone was concerned. Everyone was told to turn security up a notch. This meant we now did a full check on our car, especially underneath, every time we parked, even if we were just parked outside the American or our own embassy.

In addition to our official errands, we often visited the American embassy to get in on their amazing buffet. They had free breakfast, lunch, and dinner for all Americans and their coalition partners in one of the great halls of the old palace. Nice waiters dressed all in white offered all kinds of meat, salads, potatoes, lobsters, sandwiches, fruit, cakes, ice cream, and soda. It was a wonderland that we truly enjoyed, especially after long, hot, intense days. That there were plenty of women in the embassy from time to time only increased our appetite.

One evening, when all eight of us were having dinner with Torben, we sat down at a table with a group of young American Marines. Torben was sitting right next to our team and overheard them talk about operations in the Afghan mountains in 2002, led by “the Danish Jaegers.” The young infantrymen were full of admiration for these large and crazy vikings, who sped up and down the mountains with their 300-pounds-heavy backpacks and had al-Qaida terrorists for breakfast. Torben couldn’t restrain himself. He pointed at us with one arm and turned to the Marines.

“Gentlemen, may I present to you the Danish Jaeger Corps.”

The young faces stared at us gapingly, but their disappointed facial expressions seemed to say that we were a lot less heroic looking with our tanned faces stuffed with food.

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On my third mission as a bodyguard in Baghdad during the summer of 2004, the conditions in the city were pretty much unchanged. The green zone was still attacked almost daily by mortars and rockets, and the streets of Baghdad were still dominated by deadly fights and suicide bombers. The security was terrible, the violence gruesome, the entire Iraqi society was on the verge of collapse, and the U.S. government was under a lot of pressure due to heavy losses and a crumbling support for the war at home.

Torben was almost done with his time as an ambassador, and would continue somewhere else in the foreign services. After this intense year at this atypical ambassador’s post, he actually seemed quite unaffected. But we knew that he was really looking forward to a less dramatic job—which turned out to be as a general consul in New York—and of course finally spending some time with his family again.

I will always remember Torben as an excellent boss and a nice, calm, and balanced person. And



I will certainly never forget his getting a broom and sweeping all around the outside of the embassy when there was something that he wasn't happy about. I remember this time a typical leftwing journalist from the Danish national broadcasting company failed to uphold an agreement by mentioning something confidential in his commentary. When Torben saw him blabbering about it on TV, he went out and swept the yard until his face looked like a tomato.

With Torben leaving the job, our mission as bodyguards at the Danish embassy was resolved. We'd achieved great recognition and experience, and as a result, our military leadership decided that the Jaeger Corps would train the Army's bodyguards who would be deployed in the future.

Before I could go home, though, I had one last job to do. Maggie would be faced with a life at the embassy with a myriad of different bodyguards, local guards, and ambassadors, and I could tell she wasn't at peace. Of course, a life at the embassy was still much better than life in the streets of Baghdad. But life in Denmark would be optimal. So I found a home for her with a colleague back home and prepared a plan for her return. A Jaeger named Ork took her home with him a couple a weeks after I had gotten home myself. After 24 hours in a transport box via Kuwait and Cyprus—where she was nearly killed by the captain of the Hercules who wasn't aware she was on board—she landed on nice summer's day in 2004 at Aalborg Air Base. I picked her up and after a quick fight with my Selma, Maggie left with her new family (of which the male part is an American Marine married to a Danish woman). She's now a happy lady, safe and at home in Denmark.

After only half a year at home in Aalborg, I packed my bags once again on short notice. The trip was once again to Baghdad. Even though I felt like I'd spent enough time in that city and that country after three missions as a bodyguard, I knew I'd rather have adventures in the big world, no matter where, than to run around at home and freeze my ass off in training camp.

For the following two months, my team would serve as bodyguards for Danish Major General Agnar Rokos. He was the head of NATO's training mission, which was meant to train Iraqi officers. The general quickly gained our respect. He was a man of few words and didn't like to waste time on superficial bullshit. His face was wrinkled but his build was athletic—he went to the gym for an hour and a half every night.

The NATO training mission had its headquarters in a small area of the green zone known as Little Venice. With his usual sense of style, Saddam had this area built with inspiration from the actual Venice, Italy. The headquarters employed about 40-50 officers from various NATO countries, including a handful of Danes who were serving during the same period as Rokos.

The bodyguards would be accommodated by the U.S. embassy in some excellent twin residential containers with cable TV and showers. These were entirely different conditions than at the

Danish embassy, where we lived with five Jaegers in a 75-square-foot room and had to share a shower. We also benefited from the other fine conditions at the embassy, such as the food, the gym, and the pool.

And for me, there was yet another attractive reason why I liked staying there. Every time I passed the entrance, a pair of unusually beautiful eyes met mine. I kept using that specific entrance, so I could exchange glances with that pretty girl in the American uniform. After a week or so, I finally pulled myself together and asked her if she would like a cup of coffee. She didn't. She didn't like coffee. But she said she *would* like to go and have a cup of tea with me.

Jessica was a pretty, outgoing, and intelligent girl. At only 26 years old, she was already a captain in the U.S. Marine Corps and had a degree in economics. Her parents were from Puerto Rico, but she grew up in the United States. At night she prepared intelligence briefings, and each morning she informed the American generals at the embassy.

We really came to like each other, and for the next couple of weeks, we saw each other as much as work permitted us to. She shared a container with a female colonel who worked during the day, when Jessica was off. So we regularly met up and chatted. Amongst other things.

General Rokos' closest superior was the famous, four-star U.S. General David Petraeus. During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, he was commander of the equally famous 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. The following year, he became commander of the Multi-National Security Transition Command in Iraq, the department that aimed to rebuild the Iraqi army, the police, and infrastructure such as military bases, police stations, and border outposts. At least once a week, Rokos participated in a meeting with the other American generals who were involved in this major project.

It took place in Petraeus' relatively humble headquarters in the green zone just a mile away from the U.S. embassy. One evening, we were waiting in front of the office where the meeting took place with Petraeus' British team of bodyguards, who we got along with just fine. We were kind of surprised that a senior American general would have a British bodyguard team, but when we asked them about it, they just straight up said that they were just the best. No beating around the bush there.

The meeting that night took about an hour to finish, and afterwards Rokos got into our Land Cruiser with his usual calm manner, ready for us to take him back to the embassy so he could get his daily dose of fitness. But our stay at the embassy was brief. A Danish staff member of the NATO training mission needed to go home immediately because there was a sudden and serious illness in his family. He had to go to BIAP immediately, and we were to escort him there.

Under normal circumstances, we would never drive around the streets of Baghdad in the late

evening hours. And certainly not at all on route Irish. But the officer needed to get home, so we got out our heavy equipment and jumped in the car. We left the green zone in our usual formation, and drove at about 75 miles per hour along the dark and desolate highway. The other Land Cruiser was keeping a little more distance now in the darkness, since they knew I might need to brake more abruptly than during daylight.

With me in the car were Henrik and Lars, two experienced soldiers who have been on several missions in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The Danish officer sat silently in the back of our car. He was well aware of the risk that he was exposing himself and the entire team to, and he was about as enthusiastic about the situation as we were.

Our intuition was correct: It turned out to really be a bad time for driving.

A series of tracer rounds blasted over the car from the bridge some hundred feet ahead. My heart began beating in my throat, but I didn't try to evade the tracers as there were only deep ditches on either side of the road. The tracers were followed by a powerful searchlight that completely blinded us. Thankfully, it could only an American patrol that would first use their warning shots and then a searchlight. Had it been an ambush, the enemy would have used rocket launchers and machine guns, firing directly at the car without warning. If that had been the case, we would probably have been dead by now. Henrik quickly grabbed a piece of orange fabric that we had stuck in the windshield—a signal for all vehicles belonging to the coalition. He jumped out of the car and waved the piece of fabric high in the air and shouted at the top of his lungs, “Coalition force!”

With that, a metallic voice on a megaphone responded, “Move forward and show your hands.”

Henrik slowly moved toward the American patrol with his hands over his head. The powerful searchlight had been turned off, and I'd also turned off the lights of the car. We couldn't see him anymore. A few minutes later he came jogging back to the car and got in.

“They were not very fucking impressed that we were just blasting through here like that. I told them that it's an emergency and that seemed to calm them down a little. We're allowed to pass through, now.”

I gently rolled the car forward towards an M113 armored personnel carrier that was parked across the road. As we passed, we greeted the group of American soldiers. It had been the .50 cal machine guns on their vehicles they'd used to fire on us with, and we were very relieved they had been just warning shots.

Had they shot directly into the car, the armoring would not have helped at all. It was also reassuring that Henrik had asked the patrol to tell the other U.S. officers on Irish about our mission; that way, they'd know we'd be driving home again within the next hour.

The following week came with a few flights on a Blackhawk helicopter with general Rokos, who was going to meetings and inspecting Iraqi military facilities. The time passed quickly, with a lot of training and, of course, with Jessica.

I left Baghdad again in the early spring of 2005. New duties with the Corps lay ahead. I didn't at all miss Baghdad itself, but I missed Jessica a lot. Fortunately, we got to spend some vacations together in Berlin and in Copenhagen. We kept dating for about a year, but our works meant that we almost never got to see each other. We finally decided to end it.

For almost 20 years, my work had been my life and I never had a permanent base. It'd been hard to find a girlfriend under those circumstances. I've met women I liked several times. But there either wasn't enough time to get to know each other before I was sent off on my next mission, or it fell apart while I was away. In that way, I've missed a little harmony in my life.

When I left Iraq, there was absolutely no sign of improvement in its security. Baghdad was still an epicenter of violence and constantly on the brink of a civil war. Suicide bombers attacked daily in all major cities, and every week the militant groups performed more than 1,500 attacks against the coalition and cooperating Iraqis. Since the invasion a little more than two years earlier, the Americans alone had lost more than 1,500 soldiers and 13,000 had been injured. It was estimated the Iraqi security forces had lost nearly 2,500 soldiers and police officers, and more than 55,000 Iraqi civilians had died, too.

In February 2007, however, something happened that gave me a little hope for the country and the direction of the war. Rokos' former boss, David Petraeus, took over command of all coalition forces in Iraq.

"You cannot secure people if you do not live with them," Petraeus said. He moved 30,000 U.S. soldiers from the armored bases into Iraqi cities. Petraeus himself was the brain behind this strategy, which eventually turned out to be a big success.

Initially, however, his plan cost many lives. Between April and June alone, more than 330 American soldiers were killed. This made it the most deadly quarter for the Americans in the entire Iraq war. However, in July 2008, the figures dropped to 13 soldiers killed, fewer than in any other month since the invasion in 2003. By the end of 2008, the number of suicide attacks and roadside bombs had dropped dramatically.

In March 2007, there were 130 suicide attacks. By July 2008, that number had dropped to 40. The violence even dropped by 80 percent, and streets that were deserted before were now buzzing with life and had vibrant marketplaces and shops. Iraqi leaders and security forces regained faith in their

future as America transferred control of 11 of 18 Iraqi provinces to indigenous military units. When Barack Obama, following his inauguration as U.S. President in 2009, said American forces would begin withdrawing from Iraq on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2010 and would be completely withdrawn by 2011, it seemed like yet another bloody chapter in Iraq's history had drawn to a close. How wrong an assumption this would be.

## Chapter Fourteen: Undercover

I do not look like an Afghan—never have, never will. My heavy build, broad jaw, and Scandinavian facial features are far removed from the typical Afghan's narrow face and long, crooked nose. But I'd dyed my beard and eyebrows almost black, and covered my face and hands in brown skin cream. I wore a *lungie*, a traditional Afghan turban, on my head and the equally traditional *salwar kameez* set, which consisted of a khaki tunic and a baggy pair of trousers.

Under the tunic, I was kitted out with a bulletproof vest, a belt carrying a holstered 9mm H&K USP pistol, two extra magazines, a Gerber jack knife, and a radio connected to a discreet, skin-colored, molded ear piece. The Lowa desert boots I wore were the only thing visible that could reveal me as a soldier. But if something went wrong, I needed to be able to stand firmly.

After a few years away, I was back in Afghanistan. This country just wouldn't loosen its grip on me. I was in one of the larger cities in the central part of the country with five other Jaegers, and had found myself in the most anonymous and self-effacing role of my career. The assignment was top secret. We were operating undercover amongst the local population.

No uniform. No visible weapons. No military vehicles.

With me in the car on this trip was Mikkel, my old friend from the reconnaissance operation in the remote Afghan mountains. We were in disguise and working, as always, at night—while the city slept. In daylight, we would be exposed immediately. But at night, driving an old Toyota with dirty windows in poor street lighting, our chances of evading detection increased dramatically. We adorned the car's interior with local gadgets and left it unwashed for months, making it merge seamlessly with the environment.

The car's ramshackle appearance belied its perfect mechanical state. Engine, gearbox, shock absorbers, brakes, and tires were all relatively new. We also pumped fluid into the tires, enabling the car to continue for up to 13 miles with a puncture.

Our undercover status meant we could only use weapons if we were under extreme duress. Still, should the worst possible scenario eventuate, we would certainly put up a decent fight despite our sparse setup.

Our C8 carbines—close-quarter battle (CQB) versions with shortened barrels—were ready for use, hidden under a dark piece of cloth between the front seats of our car. I had a backup gun in a holster between the seats. Six magazines, each containing 28 cartridges, were attached to the door and discreetly covered by cloth. A number of hand and smoke grenades were hidden under the seats. Our snatch-packs, containing extra ammunition, NVGs, a satellite phone, batteries, \$500 in cash, water, and

an emergency food ration, were also hidden under the seat. Should we be forced to leave the car, it would be absolutely vital that we bring our supplies with us.

This operation involved an intelligence gatherer; a secret agent in his mid-thirties whose cover name was Eric. His job was to gather information for decision-makers at government level in the western military coalition. Information of this nature was highly sensitive, and those holding it were often influential people, or had a close relation to influential people. Eric visited and sought to gain the trust of these sources, which was not something that happened over a cup of tea in an afternoon. Such infiltration was slow and risky.

Eric's job was often lonely and required great cultural, political, linguistic, and a large amount of social insight. Knowing the technical aspects of the job is one thing, but an agent who lacks the social skills needed to work the source will fail to deliver. While some informants have no principles and gladly accept payment for information, the most valuable are the ones driven by ideology. And they require a refined approach.

Naturally, Eric's success depended upon his true identity not being revealed. He always traveled incognito. Eric and his colleagues were subdued, not only professionally, but in their private lives as well. Very few of their friends knew what they did for a living. In Eric's case, not even his own family knew.

Eric preferred to work alone, without us as a protective shield. The more people involved and the bigger the setup, the larger the operation's signature and the higher the risk of exposure. Being exposed would put all of us at risk and could undermine his entire organization's credibility. His organization had nonetheless judged Afghanistan to be so unsafe at that point, they employed the Jaeger Corps to protect their man.

Our task was to protect Eric and transport him to his meetings with informants. It was pretty simple, but it put demands on our creativity since we were unfamiliar with this type of operation.

Usually, we had numerous resources to draw from when things went wrong. Here, we were completely on our own. If something went wrong, there was no quick reaction force, no gunship, and no fighter jets we could call in. Our radios were only set up for communicating between our two vehicles. There was no one else to call. Nobody, apart from our most trusted colleagues, even knew we were in the area. And it was, of course, crucial that our identity not be revealed. Being recognized as western soldiers would not only get us killed, but would also make it impossible for our comrades or allies to work in the same area.

We put in months of training for this mission with the Jaeger Corps back home in Denmark. The main focus was how to operate in and from a car, which would be our operative platform—one to be

vacated only in emergencies. We practiced driving techniques in old beat-up cars. We had some fun with it, at times turning into wannabe racecar drivers as we pulled high-speed 180-degree turns and various skidding and dodging maneuvers.

We practiced shadowing a car on country roads and in larger provincial towns in Denmark. Using several vehicles and overlapping one another reduces the chances of being noticed when shadowing a car. We also learned how to take precautions to avoid being shadowed ourselves. If we were being followed, we learned to flee at breakneck speed. Enjoying that particular procedure on the small, dark country roads left more than a few of our dummy agents white-faced and cowering in the back seat.

Another procedure we prepared for was picking up an informant at a particular location at a precise point in time. An alternative pick-up point and emergency plans needed to be organized beforehand. We also practiced close-proximity battle techniques in the cars in preparation for dealing with hostile, stubborn opponents.

We learned basic phrases and vocabulary in Pashto, the most common language in Afghanistan. Finally, we became the first Danish soldiers ever to complete a course in applying make-up—learning to color our eyebrows, darken our skin, and attach a fake beard with glue.

Training exercises are one thing; real operations are something else. I was behind the wheel of the old Toyota as we drove out from the hangar and up a small gravel road, which led to a gate in the far corner of the base. When not in use, the cars were parked in the old, abandoned hangar, which nobody but us had access to. That was also where we changed our clothes and applied makeup for our nightly journeys. Mikkel was in the passenger seat, discreetly checking the GPS and map of the city. I was in good hands with Mikkel and had absolute faith that he would, as always, perform his task flawlessly. Some years ago, he was my partner on an extreme and exhausting operation in the mountains in the southeastern part of Afghanistan. Back then he won my utmost respect. He was a unique partner. After the gate, we turned to the left and headed to the city center. The four other men in our team were a few hundred feet behind us, out of sight, in an old Toyota HiAce minibus, which was in the same fine mechanical state as our car. It had curtains in the rear windows, which was normal around these parts and gave us the opportunity to speak with some of our informants in the car without being seen.

Eric was at a meeting in the city and needed to be picked up from a small alley. The trip to town took us down dark, potholed, and often unsealed, roads. It was a peaceful and quiet location with almost no traffic. It would actually be an advantage though if there had been more cars to hide amongst. There were no mullahs calling the faithful to prayer. No lights on in the houses. And we saw only a few men on foot with the exception of the occasional weary figure pedaling an old bicycle. No



women or children. But there were lots of dogs roaming the streets in search of sewage water and food scraps.

Mikkel had his hands full keeping an eye on the planned route. I kept our speed slow so he'd have time to check the map and GPS using a small flashlight. We more or less knew where the Afghan government forces had their checkpoints set up, but we still kept a wary eye out in case they'd been moved. It'd be bad news if they had; a surprise checkpoint could prove disastrous to our mission. A flashlight in my face would almost certainly uncover my disguise. If a checkpoint guard turned out to be obstinate, insisting on knowing who we were and what we were doing, it could escalate to a confrontation, even though we were fighting the same enemy: the Taliban and al-Qaida.

The other car, the minibus, followed a route parallel to ours. We had charted some orientation points on the map, which we referred to over the radio. This ensured that we always knew where the other car was. We did travel together along some stretches, and had unscrewed the bulbs in the left taillight and the right headlight on both cars, so we could identify each other in the dark. There was no great risk of getting stopped for driving without correct lights on the car here in Afghanistan.

Mikkel instructed me to turn left down a street with a big intersection. About 300 feet down the street we saw the outlines of military vehicles and chicanes, which funneled oncoming traffic. It was a checkpoint not on the map. Mikkel cursed. There was no way to turn off or around. If I reversed or turned around, it would indicate we had something to hide. We had no option but to continue.

Mikkel hid his map and GPS under the seat while I checked that my third gun was in place. The time was just past 1 a.m. I hoped the Afghan guards would be tired and would just wave us through. But as we approached, a guard armed with an AK-47 stepped onto the road and motioned for us to stop. Mikkel and I both cursed. I winded down my window and drove slowly toward him.

"Salaam Alaykum," he greeted us.

He was young and had a light, clear voice. And he had not yet seen my face.

"Wa Alaykum as-Salaam," I returned softly, hoping not to expose my accent.

He got out his flashlight. I prepared for the worst. He switched on the light and shined it into the car. The beam found Mikkel, but the guard seemed uninterested in him, instead moving the beam back to me and pointing it directly into my face. It rested on me for several long seconds, and I felt like a small child that had been caught stealing—exposed, vulnerable, and awaiting the inevitable punishment.

Then, the guard said something that I did not understand. His tone was friendly, though, and he didn't appear aggressive. He leaned toward my face and must have been able to see that I was not a local.

“Tha tsanga ye?” I asked in a friendly voice. “How are you?”

He nodded but said nothing. There was no doubt that he had seen right through my disguise. I would only appear more suspicious if I continued with my limited supply of Pashto phrases.

I reached for a small bunch of \$50 notes, hidden in a crack on the dashboard. My trouble money.

I gambled, slowly handing him a note and switching to English. “Thank you.”

He remained silent, but shined his light on the \$50 note, scrutinizing it with interest. The money was probably equivalent to several months of wages for him. The flashlight switched off. He glanced at the other guards, who suspected nothing and were chatting away by a military jeep. Then, he pocketed the note.

“Okay,” he said quietly.

Luckily, he saw no reason to create problems, and secured himself a nice little personal bonus.

“Tashakkur,” I said, thanking him. I put the car into gear and proceeded slowly down the street.

Mikkel and I let out huge sighs of relief. Long live my trouble money.

Our colleagues in the minibus, who had taken another route, had become worried about us. But we could now inform them over the radio that everything was okay. We continued to our reference point, a small street where we were to pick up Eric, arriving half an hour early.

The minibus carried on down the street. Its task was to make certain there were no potential threats on the street or on the route we were following away from the area, keeping an eye out for parked cars with people in them, or people moving up and down the street. Any activity at this time of night would appear suspicious. If we suspected the pick-up point had been compromised in any way, we would send a signal to Eric that we were activating our alternative plan.

Mikkel and I parked in a dark corner. We couldn’t see the pick-up point from where we were, but we were fewer than 15 seconds from it. Every five minutes, we’d receive an all-clear message from the minibus. As we neared the pick-up time, we got a report over the radio. “Minus two minutes to pick-up. All okay. We are continuing.” The minibus left the area to wait farther along the route leading back to the base.

Precisely 30 seconds before the agreed upon time, I started the car. Fifteen seconds later, I put it in gear and drove to the pick-up point. Eric stepped out of the dark right on time, to the second. Had it not been for his recognizable way of walking, I never would have recognized him in his local attire and with his big beard. I stopped in front of him. He got in the backseat and said “thank you” before reporting that night’s meeting had been extremely rewarding.

Eric was an astute type with a dry sense of humor, which I found entertaining. He didn’t participate much in our ass and tits talk, and wasn’t accustomed to being surrounded by a bunch of

energetic, restless Jaegers. I think it was a bit strenuous for him at times. We got along well, though, and often talked, ate, or watched movies together.

I had a fair amount of one-on-one time with Eric, who told me about his fascinating and unusual life. He was very pleased at that moment because one of his informants proved to be an absolute goldmine. He believed the source had so much valuable information that he was making history in his field. Many of his international competitors had expressed great admiration and recognition for his work.

The intensity of our work with Eric fluctuated. During some periods, we'd make trips every evening, while at other times, nothing would really happen. It depended entirely on Eric's sources. Typically, they could meet only at certain times and we just had to accept that.

We had no problems staying focused. We knew Afghanistan was a dangerous place and that we must remain disciplined when solving tasks in the city at night. We could under no circumstances drop our concentration levels or underestimate the abilities of the Taliban or al-Qaida. Four Canadian soldiers had been killed recently, not far from here. They had been speaking with local children when a suicide bomber on a bicycle approached. Several children were also killed.

Even though we operated undercover, there was no guarantee that the enemy couldn't hit us. He was out there, albeit not always visible to the naked eye. Calm circumstances could suddenly transform into a violent, tumultuous battlefield. A single rotten informant could lead us into an ambush. In our "soft," unarmored cars, and with our limited firepower, we would have poor chances of survival.

The year before, a British team from the Special Boat Service (SBS) ran into an ambush in a city not far from where we were. Two of the five men died, and one was critically wounded. A couple of months after our departure, a number of Taliban fighters disguised as Afghan government forces managed to enter one of the city's bigger hotels—the one where Eric had a lot of his meetings and security otherwise seemed good—armed with Kalashnikovs and hand grenades. One of them was wearing a vest full of explosives, which he detonated in the hotel lobby. Six to eight people were killed and a higher number injured.

Beyond the trips with Eric, we passed the days at our base sleeping, eating, running, lifting weights, playing volleyball, and shooting. We drove into the mountains and set up cans and other improvised targets. Then, like a bunch of shirtless rednecks, we let rip with our guns and carbines. We appreciated the absence of restrictions and rules.

Now and then, we'd get the opportunity to drive to the city during the day in our armored Land Cruisers. We normally did it in civilian clothing, but of course carrying weapons and wearing bulletproof vests. The many Western NGOs in their four-wheelers were prominent in the city, so we

didn't attract a great deal of attention.

The last time I experienced city life in Afghanistan had been in Kabul under the Taliban regime, with all its horror and oppression. But no longer did I see corpses hanging from lampposts, patrolling black-clad Taliban, or people being beaten with clubs. It pleased me to see kites dancing above the city roofs, children playing and eating ice cream, smiling beardless men buying grilled kebabs from the many small booths, to hear music from shops and cars, and to see women with children shopping in the colorful markets. All in all, I sensed a mood of reconciliation and hope for the future—the same one I'd wished for these people all those years before.

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My last mission in Afghanistan was yet another dog rescue.

Some time before, a female American officer found an eight-week-old puppy in a far corner of the base. It was lying on the edge of the landing strip and smeared with tar. She saved it and got it back on its feet. When she had to return home, I offered to take care of Kaja, as we named her.

This complicated things for me, especially when I decided that she must come with me to Denmark, where I'd found a home for her. First, I had to bribe a Greek veterinary doctor with cash, gin, and vodka to vaccinate her and do the necessary paperwork. She could not travel with me on the specialized aircraft taking me home, so I donated six bottles of red wine to an obliging Danish soldier, who assumed responsibility for transporting her in a homebuilt travel box on a Turkish airliner. Finally, a Turkish captain with a big grin on his face had to be bribed with a fine bottle of Scotch whiskey before letting the dog onboard; it was against all regulations.

Kaja was hard to hide, though. Despite two powerful tranquilizers, she barked and howled in her box on the Danish soldier's lap. No one onboard doubted that something unauthorized was going on. But Kaja made it to Copenhagen, where she was smuggled through customs in the bottom of a bag and quickly whisked away by her new owners to her new home.

Shortly after getting her out of the country, following one more successful mission, I was sent home, too.

Eric was not replaced. As far as I know, to this day, he continues his lonely job undercover in the secret agent world.



## Chapter Fifteen: Better safe than sorry

In Basra, Iraq's second largest city, on September 23, 2006, a Danish close-protection team, riding in a pair of armored Toyota Land Cruisers, drove onto a roadside bomb on the outskirts of town. A 36-year-old Air Force specialist named Kim Wadim died instantaneously. Another team member was severely wounded, while seven others received non-life-threatening injuries. The team was unable to continue their mission, and my team replaced them the following day.

A couple days later, we organized ourselves in a few tents and established our operations room at Camp Dannevang, where 500 Danish soldiers were stationed alongside a 5000-strong British infantry brigade at Shaiba Log Base about 10 miles north of Basra. We were immediately inserted into the bodyguard service for two officials of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responsible for a number of civil reconstruction projects. They had lived in Basra until the deadly roadside bomb, but had moved to the military camp to seek better protection.

The war in Iraq had been raging for three and a half years at that point. The southern Basra-region was calmer for the first three years than bloody hot spots such as Baghdad or Fallujah. But the Danish and British fights against the local militia in and around Basra had become more intense throughout 2006, and a total of five Danish soldiers had lost their lives. In addition to battles with the local militias, JAM (Jaysh Al-Mahdi) roadside bombs had become the biggest threat. Not only were they increasing in number, but they were also being made with more and more sophistication. This was cause for concern in the Danish battalion.

Roadside bombs of the type EFP, Explosive Formed Projectile, were especially widespread. They were very precise and powerful, developed by the militias with support from Iran. As the name suggests, the explosion formed a metal shell into a half-kilo-heavy projectile; with a speed of 1,5 mile-per-second, the projectile easily penetrated even heavily armored vehicles. EFP-bombs were often triggered by mobile phones or by small motion sensors, so-called PIR, which could be molded into papier-mâché to resemble a stone. When a vehicle passed by, the sensor triggered the EFP's deadly charge. This was how the Specialist Wadim was killed.

None of us Jaegers had been on a close-protection mission in the Basra region before, and it was a very different environment to operate in compared to what we were used to seeing in Baghdad. The city of Basra itself had about 2.1 million inhabitants, and was located off the river Shatt al-Arab, which spread into a vast network of canals throughout the region and gave the town the nickname "Venice of the Middle East." There wasn't any sign of gondola romance here, though.

The rivers and canals were surrounded by large marshes and lush agricultural areas, where

farmers herded cattle and grew corn, rice, grains, and dates. Between the city and Camp Dannevang, the landscape was a barren and desolate desert, from which numerous refineries produced a large portion of Iraq's daily 2.4 million barrels of oil. Our problem with the vast open landscape was that when two Land Cruisers approached on the long desolate desert road, it was almost as if we were advertising that a close-protection team was approaching. The militias had pre-positioned their roadside bombs and also kept the road under observation so they could trigger the explosives as we passed by. For this reason, we avoided driving through the desert in daylight as much as possible.

That night, we embarked on one of the week's many excursions to Basra in order to collect information from our colleagues at the intelligence department of British headquarters, stationed in "Basra Palace"—one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces.

We took special precautions during our trip. It was too risky, even downright stupid, to drive down the dark desert road with the lights blazing. So we drove with completely blacked-out cars and wore NVGs. Even the dashboard was covered in cloth so the small lights wouldn't interfere with our vision while wearing our goggles. We also removed the bulbs from our vehicle's brake lights so the driver in the second Land Cruiser wouldn't be blinded.

The only problem was, the British had set up a lot of checkpoints on the road between Camp Dannevang and Basra, which they also kept completely blacked out. If we failed to detect them within proper distance, and didn't signal or make contact with them identifying ourselves, it was likely they would open fire on us, believing we were approaching suicide bombers. Therefore, the front car turned on its lights on those stretches where we knew the British typically established checkpoints.

On this particular evening, we chose the quietest route we could find leading into the city's southern outskirts, where we had to drive through a series of residential neighborhoods in order to get to the palace. I was driving the first car, and had to push my night vision goggles up onto my forehead repeatedly so as to not be blinded by the orange flames of the oil refineries. At the same time, I was fighting to avoid the biggest craters in the bumpy road, the terrain pushing the heavy armored car's shock absorbers to the extreme.

"Iraqi checkpoint in 1500 feet," said Claus, one of the two other Jaegers in my vehicle.

We knew the route well, and knew there was a small checkpoint coming up that was manned by a handful of sleepy policemen. They usually didn't bother to stop anyone; they'd just sit in their chairs next to a small clay hut at the side of the road.

A few hundred feet from the checkpoint, I could see that they were actually just sitting next to their hut, smoking their hookah pipes. I saw no reason to turn on the lights or let them know we were coming. So we shot out of the darkness, like two black meteors in a cloud of sand and dust, and the

guards were so shocked that one of them fell off his seat, the other two running into the little hut.

Our vehicles were filled with roars of laughter.

A few miles later, we got to the southern outskirts of Basra, and even though it was almost 10 p.m., the narrow streets were still buzzing with activity from the shops selling food, electronics, carpets, and other day-to-day products.

We didn't feel safer here at all, but we needed to drive with the lights on, now. Iraqis had no doubt that we were foreign soldiers. Some children and young people would smile and wave at us, while others threw stones at the car.

Quietly focused, we kept an eye out for danger signals, or combat indicators, such as armed men, men who were talking on hand-held radios or mobile phones while watching us, or motorcycles or cars following us.

We were only a couple of miles away from our destination when I turned left into another shopping street in the small town of Abdaliyah.

"What's going on here?" Claus and I exclaimed simultaneously.

As a heavy contrast to the lively streets that we'd just driven through, this one was completely silent and deserted. No shops were open and there was no traffic and no people. I pulled over and turned off the lights. The second car, following behind us, did the same.

"This doesn't seem right," Claus said. I agreed with him.

Why had people chosen to stay away from this street? We had a bad feeling in our guts, and if experience had taught us anything, it was to listen to those sensations if we were to stay alive. Claus reported to the other car via radio that we'd be changing to the alternative route. I quickly drove onto a parallel street heading toward the palace. Here, a boy suddenly appeared and gestured to us—waving us forward to a point where the street turned after a few hundred feet. This was another combat indicator, which, even though somewhat vague, forced us to choose an alternative route once again. With these two indicators still fresh, we chose to completely avoid the southern part of town. It took an extra hour to make it to the palace. But we were in no hurry. Better safe than sorry.

The next morning, I popped by the Danish battalion's intelligence section on my morning run to get the summary of the previous night's incidents. My stomach tightened. I read that a platoon of British soldiers had driven onto a roadside bomb in exactly the neighborhood we chose to avoid. Ten of them were seriously wounded. The following weeks were marked by an increasing number of rocket and mortar attacks at Camp Dannevang. Almost every night, we'd spend several hours in the camp's safety bunkers until the attacks let off.

But unfortunately, yet another Danish soldier was killed by hostile fire. We all participated in



the somber ramp ceremony, where all the camp's British and Danish soldiers paid their last respects to the 20-year-old private first class as his coffin was carried aboard a C130 and flown back home to Denmark.

By the end of the year, Camp Dannevang had closed down.

The base facilities were transferred to the Iraqi military, and the battalion reemerged as Camp Einherjer at Basra Air Station. That brought our mission to an end, and after three months in the hot and dusty desert, I was actually looking forward to a week of exercises in cold and wet Denmark.

## **Chapter Sixteen: Night Hawk—probably the best exercise in the world**

The situation was as follows: A Danish ambassador had been kidnapped during a visit to a war zone. He was being held in a remote desert area by a number of terrorists demanding the Danish government immediately put their mission in the region to an end. The terrorist group had a reputation for not sparing any hostages, and they announced that if the government did not cooperate, the ambassador would be executed. In the meantime, a U.S. Predator drone had tracked the terrorists to their hideout. After 24 hours, it was decided that the Jaeger Corps would be deployed to free the hostage and eliminate the terrorists.

It was a dark and wet fall evening at Aalborg Air Base, and the Jaeger Corps was conducting exercise Night Hawk, which held the reputation, among SOF units throughout NATO, to have the finest and most realistic practice setup.

U.S. Navy SEALs, German Kommando Spezial Kräfte (KSK), Deutsch Korps Commandotroepen (KCT), and the Swedish Särskilda Skydd Group (SOG), took part in the exercise that ran for five days and included all the types of objectives the Jaeger Corps and other SOF units might encounter. Among others, this exercise focused on special reconnaissance (SR) and hostage actions. My team of eight men was putting the final touches on our preparations for the coming night's work. I was the team's breacher, and was preparing some "flex" charges we'd use to blow up the door of the house where the hostage was being held. I had already checked my C8 rifle, my shotgun, my STI 9mm pistol, my night vision goggles, and, with extra care, my parachute.

We were going to do a night jump from an altitude of 14,000 feet. A parachute jump at night always complicates things, and every detail and every piece of equipment would require preparation down to the smallest detail. My team would have to jump above the North Sea, a few miles from the shore, and establish a tactical landing zone, a TLZ, on the beach. Once there, a British C-130 was to land and drop off our two Humvees. Their purpose was twofold: We needed them to transport us to the house where the ambassador was being held hostage, and we needed the added firepower of their mounted .50 caliber heavy machine guns during the attack. After that, the terrorists were to be captured or eliminated, the hostages freed, and then we'd return to the beach where we'd call the C-130 back for our extraction.

Night Hawk was always a breathtaking exercise couldn't get any closer to the real thing. Tonight was no exception.

We flew tactically in the C-130, the cabin blacked-out. Only fluorescent flickers of red and green broke the darkness with silhouettes of the Jaegers from the other teams—the ones that would be

waiting in the sand-colored Humvees. The two vehicles filled up most of the cabin, and it was not permitted to open the loading ramp when they were aboard. So we couldn't jump out from where we typically would. Instead, we'd have to use a side door. I was the second man, right on the heels of the team's scout, Claus. The door opened, and the noise from the aircraft's two large engines roaring on the wing a few feet ahead was deafening.

I looked out into a big black hole. Nothing. No light from the ground below. No moon. Pitch black. But I knew that the western part of North Jutland was about 14,000 feet underneath me. And I also knew that I was going to jump out into that black hole within the next two minutes.

My adrenaline was pumping and I felt my heartbeat throughout my entire body. To jump out of an airplane from a height of 14,000 feet on a dark October night goes against any kind of logic. Nevertheless, I was excited. Everything else—logic, doubt, fear—was shut out. No everyday bullshit and no annoying things to deal with. Only this. It brought every single fiber in my body to life.

I jumped, accelerating toward the ground at a speed of almost 125 miles per hour. It was a cold night, but I couldn't feel it. A cloud hit me. I passed through it in a couple of seconds and could now see the small dots of light on the ground. I looked for the other Jaegers, who, like myself, had green glow sticks tied around their legs. But I couldn't see them. I turned my attention to my altimeter. It is my main instrument and it showed 9000 feet, which meant there was still approximately two miles of freefall before I would have to pull my chute.

When I pulled the handle, my chute gave a violent jerk; the night vision goggles fastened to my helmet hammered down onto the bridge of my nose. Warm blood streamed over my mouth and jaw. I didn't know if my nose was broken or just split open, but I didn't care either way. My primary concern was my orientation; I didn't want to end up floating out over the sea. I focused on the ground beneath my feet, checked my compass, and kept my eyes open for the other Jaegers in the air.

There had been grim examples of Jaegers almost crashing into each other in mid-air. Inexperienced jumpers tend to keep their eyes fixed on the ground, but colliding into another jumper could mean a major nightmare scenario where the tangled parachutes would just drop straight to the ground—*adios amigos!*

My plate carrier and my rifle with its attached 40 mm grenade launcher were very uncomfortable and had slid up around my neck and jaw when I released the chute. That meant I could only see straight ahead. I couldn't turn my head to any side to orientate myself. Every time I went to look in another direction, I'd have to pull at the steering handle to turn the entire parachute.

Worse, I was supposed to land on an entirely dark landing zone. This was intentional: You're not supposed to be able to see it with the naked eye. The only indicator of its location would come from

a few flashing infrared lights, which I should have been able to spot with my night vision goggles from about 1500 feet above. But I couldn't. There were thousands of lights from the cities, houses, and cars of Jutland, but no flashing lights in the middle of a field. This meant trouble, because it was essential the team land in proximity to each other so we could get to the beach quickly and establish a TLZ for the C-130, which was supposed to land within the next hour.

Another problem I noticed was the wind. It was much stronger than I'd previously anticipated. So strong, in fact, that at height of 600 feet, I was actually going backward instead of forward, which was not how it should be. I had no idea what I was heading toward, and chose to stop looking for the landing zone. Now, it was just about getting to the ground safely.

Still going backward, I looked down and saw some fields. It was fine to land in a field, but I still couldn't see what was behind me. It made me feel uneasy. Suddenly, I felt a polar-cold sensation run down my back when I heard a familiar sound—a deep and monotonous gushing. I pulled hard on the steering handle and turned around to confirm.

Shit. I was right.

There were two enormous wind turbines, and if I kept on this course, I would back right into them and be smashed instantly. So much for renewable energy.

I pulled as hard as I could at the steering wheel, forcing the chute around so I could at least see the turbines. At the same time, I realized that my speed was increasing dramatically as I was now flying with the wind at my back. I was about 300 feet from the ground and was flying directly towards the turbine blades. There was no way of turning at this point. My only option was to try to fly right between the blades and land on the other side. Naturally, I was worried about the turbulence that the blades might create. But I was left with no choice.

In the next moment, I was blown between the turbine blades, the mighty structures swinging by at hair-raisingly close distances. But by some kind of miracle, I squeezed through without being struck, and I prepared myself to face a harsh landing in a powerful tailwind. Fortunately, there was no frost, so the soil on the ground was still soft. That was the last thought I had before hitting the ground and beginning a series of uncontrollable somersaults, landing with my face right in the dirt and giving my beaten nose another pounding. I rolled over onto my back and laid there for a second, my heart pounding in my chest, before looking back at the two windmills. Then, I sat up, prepared my weapon, turned on my radio and my GPS, and packed my parachute in my designated bag. There was a team to be located and a landing zone to establish.

After a few miles of quick marching through the fields of Jutland, I located the other members of my team. We rendezvoused at the edge of a forest and continued on together toward the beach. We

only had half an hour to get to the beach and set up the infrared lights so the crew of the C-130 would know where to land.

To land a large aircraft on a dark night on a beach in a strong wind required a lot of skill from the British pilots. They'd fly with all lights turned off, both exterior and interior, and all tasks in the cockpit were done using night vision goggles. It wasn't just a random crew or a random aircraft, but specially trained pilots and navigators who specialized in operations with the British Special Air Service. We made a point to treat them very well when they were here, spending more than a few very wet nights in Aalborg's bars.

We arrived and placed the infrared lights on the TLZ. Shortly after, the 70-ton metal monstrosity appeared out of the darkness. I couldn't hear it approach because of the powerful sound of the ocean and the high winds. But a few seconds later, when the enormous craft touched down and the pilots reversed the thrust, the roar of the four engines dominated the night air.

I was sitting on the beach next to one of the infrared lights and had to be ready to jump onto one of the Humvees that had arrived with the plane. Sitting at the side of the landing zone, I felt very small and vulnerable when the huge silhouette blitzed toward me and passed by so close, I could reach out my arm and touch the engine on one of the wings.

The pilots brought the plane to a halt on a stretch barely 2000 feet long, and a few seconds later, the two Humvees were speeding down the cargo ramp and toward us. As I jumped onto one of the Humvees, the Hercules pilots turned the aircraft around and took off from the soft surface of the beach. In less than three minutes, the plane had landed, delivered two Humvees, and taken off again. Pretty damn impressive.

Three miles to the south, there was a compound in the middle of a large, desolate marsh. The house had been built for hostage liberation scenarios—the direct action phase of the exercise—and had furniture as well as terrorists and a hostage, the ambassador, in the form of dressed-up dolls. The terrain around the house was military terrain, so all shooting that would take place that night would involve live ammunition.

The plan had been rehearsed with rock drills in great detail back at the air base. But it was one thing to prepare and rehearse in daylight at a relaxed pace, while quite another when fire rages and you find yourself in a dark and smoky room, filled with shouts and screams and signals on the radio. But nobody should be in doubt about a thing. No one should “suspect” something or “count” on something to happen. Or as our American and British colleagues like to say: Assumptions are the mother of all fuck-ups.

We were about 1500 meters out from the target when we got into position. In the air above the

sea, two Danish F-16 fighters and the American AC-130 Gunship gave the green light. In less than a minute, we could push ahead with the Humvees. But first, it was the snipers' turn to show they were fully ready. And they were. Silently, they delivered shots into the heads of the two dolls in front of the house, which were supposed to be the guards. They fell down onto the ground and were therefore considered eliminated.

Right after that, I heard the signal in my earpiece to move toward the front door. Until the door was breached, everything would have to happen in utter silence. We moved the last 150 meters toward the door with me at the back of the line. As the "man with the key" it was my job to breach the door efficiently and quickly, so I had my "flex-charge" ready in one hand and my pistol in the other—I couldn't use my rifle with just one hand.

When the point man reached the door, I was already heading toward it to place my hydrogel flex charge and the detcord. It was hard to see anything with the night vision goggles on, so I pulled at the detonator to make sure it was still connected to the cord. When I rolled out the cable, one of my teammates slowly led me backwards with a hand on my shoulder. If I were to stumble or fall here, it would be heard from the house and our element of surprise would be lost.

"Standby, standby..."

I released the charge and the silence was broken by a hollow bang, which turned the door into a cloud of dust and shards of wood.

"Go, go, go!"

Within a second, we each switched from completely silent behavior to mobilizing the entire body's force and aggression. We crashed through the opening, the white lights on our weapons activated. A series of rapid-fire single shots were followed by a loud and clear message, "two tango down." The first two Jaegers had dropped two terrorists.

Claus yelled, "Closed door." I was already on my way toward him. Propulsion and momentum were crucial. No beating around the bush here. No unnecessary rhetoric. Just heading toward our objective, the hostage, whom we labeled "golf".

I grabbed my shotgun and fired three shots into the door's lock, followed by a powerful kick. The door flew open, and we threw a flashbang into the room. Six hollow bangs sounded, accompanied by strong flashes of light. The Jaegers blasted into the room and fired a couple of shots. Three more terrorists had been eliminated.

At the same time, I heard a loud scream behind me and turned around. Our team's second-in-command, Lars, was lying in the floor and appeared to be in a great deal of pain. Blood was spurting from his thigh, and it looked like he'd been hit in an artery. I kicked open a door leading to a room we

hadn't opened yet. I couldn't help Lars, as it would mean giving up my own security. But I yelled for Jan, our medic, at the top of my lungs. He quickly looked at Lars' leg.

"Help yourself. Use your tourniquet," he said.

Jan did the right thing. We couldn't slow down our momentum just because a man was down. Doing so would mean losing the fight. Our leader, Tom, shouted, "Move on!" We lined up in front of the last room. The lock on the door received the same treatment with my shotgun as the previous one, and soon after we had full control of this room, too. Our hostage—a heavy doll wearing handcuffs and a hood over its head—sat in a corner behind some furniture.

"We have 'golf'—leaving the target," Tom reported over the radio.

Jan knelt down next to Lars, who was still writhing on the floor. He had stopped the bleeding by himself, but Jan stabilized him further and quickly inserted an IV in the fallen man's arm. Lars had prepared his leg with a pump filled with a blood-like liquid as instructed before the exercise. He was to activate it when he was "hit" by terrorist bullets. The rest of us, of course, knew nothing of this, and had to deal with the unforeseen hiccup on the fly.

From when I blew open the door until we left the house again, less than five minutes had passed. We had the hostage with us and hastily began moving toward the waiting Humvees parked a few hundred feet away, behind some sand embankments. Over the radio, we were told the enemy's reinforcements were on their way toward us in large numbers.

Søren, our forward air controller responsible for calling close air support, contacted the F-16s overhead, which had been standing by to drop their thousand-pound-bombs or JDAMS. He marked the enemy's vehicles—remote-activated metal disks which popped up from the ground—with infrared lasers, and gave short and precise instructions so the fighter planes knew when and where to drop their deadly cargo. At the same time, the two Humvee-mounted .50 caliber machine guns began spewing rounds toward the targets, and the lighter machine guns joined them from the surrounding dunes. I fired two AT-4 rockets toward a pair of tank targets, and followed up with my rifle—striking the enemies that popped up in small groups 500-600 feet away. Some hundred feet ahead in the dark marsh, more vehicle targets appeared. Søren called out over the radio to the AC-130 Gunship circling a couple of miles above us. This version of the flying fortress was armed with a 25mm Gatling gun, one 40mm gun, a 105mm howitzer, and came equipped with mounted thermal supervision equipment, enabling it to see even the tiniest of movements on the ground from impressive distances. Søren marked the targets with his infrared laser pointer while communicating with the aircraft, and moments later, the targets vanished into thin air, leaving only an inferno of flames behind.

We were in a hurry after the attack. The hostage still had to be returned to safety, and we had

less than 20 minutes to get to the pick-up spot, where we'd wait for the C-130 in the shelter of the dunes.

One of the Humvee drivers had sprained his foot, so I offered my help. I'd driven a Humvee for a couple of years, and I knew that vehicle like the back of my hand. In the pitch-black night, without lights on, I drove 60-70 miles per hour down the gravel roads of Jutland with six Jaegers onboard. I oriented myself using my dual Litton NVGs, while the Jaeger in the passenger seat kept me informed of the distance to the next turn.

"1500 feet right, 300 feet left..."

I loved the feeling of sitting behind the wheel of the two-and-half-ton, eight-cylindere, all-terrain machine, just blasting through the dark forest.

We reached the beach and drove into position in shelter of the dunes. Five minutes to touchdown. Once the C-130 had landed and come to a halt, it would take about 10-15 seconds before the ramp was completely down. When the ramp became ready, the loadmaster would flash his infrared light a few times to signal us. Our arrival behind the transporter had to correspond perfectly with the lowering of the ramp—we needed to be able to drive onto it immediately, without pause.

I looked down at my watch. 3:50 a.m.

"One minute out," crackled the British pilot in my earpiece.

Once again I heard the deep roars of the engines, and as if out of nowhere, the large aircraft passed us on its way down the beach. When I saw that it was about to come to a halt, I sped up the Humvee to the maximum and raced down the beach. When we got within 800-900 feet from the plane, I steered the vehicle straight behind the ramp. There were the two infrared flashes. The ramp was directly ahead now, and I continued toward it at high speed—only hitting the brakes when we got within 20-25 feet.

The aircraft's engines were operating at their highest revolutions; the noise was indescribable, and despite the partially closed-up cabin of our vehicle, sand whipped my face. There was only a foot between the sides of our Humvee and the C-130's cargo bay, so we had to maneuver carefully. That said, I'd never crashed into the sides of a Hercules when disembarking a TLZ before, and I didn't intend to start tonight.

A few seconds later, our vehicle met the ramp. I accelerated into the cargo bay and continued until I saw a little green glow stick on my left side. I turned off the engine and jumped out to help the two British loadmasters who had already started to stabilize the Humvee's front and rear with chains. The second Humvee had stopped right behind me, the ramp now lifting, and the pilots had already begun turning the plane around to take off once again. I grabbed onto a side mirror in order to keep



from falling, and jumped back into the front seat, giving a thumbs-up to the loadmasters who then signaled to the cockpit that everything was ready via their intercoms.

The plane built up power, and the cabin began shaking as if it were about to collapse. The pilots released the brakes, and the engines thrust us forward with all their power, pushing me back into my seat. Once the large craft got off the ground, things became calmer. We banked sharply and rose about the sea.

The whole operation had gone as planned. I turned around to look at the ambassador in the back seat. He just sat there with a large, stupid smile painted onto his fat doll face. I laughed. It had been a terrific night.

After a few hours of sleep, we got back to work. The rest of the week continued in the same manner. We prepared for operations during the day, executed them in the night, and only slept for a couple of hours in between. I loved it.

In the daytime, we'd also train at one of the most vital Jaeger Corps skills: helicopter insertion and extraction. The jungle extractions, specifically, were the most popular because they were insanely entertaining. It was a procedure that, as the title suggests, was often used in the jungle, where dense treetops towered 150-200 feet above the ground, making it impossible for a helicopter to land. When a team needed to be inserted or extracted from an area of operation, the chopper crew would lower down ropes to the Jaegers, who'd hook onto them with their snap-hooks. Then, the helicopter would rise and hastily exit the area, Jaegers in tow. We practiced this at the air base, and were the cause of many gaping mouths experienced by drivers on the congested road, which we'd pass over while hanging on a one-inch-thick rope, dangling from the helicopter 75 feet farther up. We also practiced rappelling, which was suitable when the helicopter couldn't get down far enough over the target, or if we were wearing heavy equipment.

We used a third type of helicopter technique when we embarked on a training session at Aalborg's huge power plant, Nordkraft, which lies off of the Limfjord. We flew in British, German, and Danish helicopters, in close formation, low-level over the fjord. I was in the first helicopter, leaning halfway out the side, ready for battle. I could see the six other helicopters behind me through my NVGs. Without the helicopters landing, we synchronously jumped down onto the roof of the power plant while others fast-roped in.

As we moved along the various floors fringing the power plant's large central hall, we were attacked by a large number of "terrorists". We used paintball projectiles that could still shoot an eye out from 75 feet away, so there was a pretty hard payback if you made the slightest tactical error. But

again, we defeated the terrorists. Night Hawk really lived up to its reputation. Our Swedish sister unit, SOG, playing off the Danish Carlsberg beer slogan ‘probably the best beer in the world,’ would say of Night Hawk, “It’s probably the best exercise in the world.”

I enjoyed a great many excellent training exercises with the Jaeger Corps.

We spent a lot of time doing close quarter battle drills, running and gunning in designated kill houses in Sweden, Norway, and Germany using live ammunition. Those training facilities were built with bulletproof walls, and offered up a bunch of vivid effects to stress us as we ran through them. For example, clouds of evaporating CO<sub>2</sub> from dry ice were pumped into the room, limiting visibility, and flashing lights and a deafening soundtrack playing all the noises of war added further to the confusion by making it almost impossible to communicate. To optimize the training, all rooms were equipped with small cameras to film the team and promptly catch any errors.

Facing these challenges daily made my life as a Jaeger a constantly interesting one. We were so privileged to have the available resources to train anywhere in the world with the best possible kinds of sparring partners. The majority of our training took place abroad, since we simply didn’t have adequate facilities or climate conditions at home in Denmark.

The annual climbing courses took place in Switzerland, Austria, and Norway. Exhausting tactical climbing up and down the mountains pushed us to the physical extremes, reminiscent for many of their experiences in the Afghan mountains.

We also received training in arctic warfare in the northernmost part of Sweden alongside our Swedish sister unit, which was comprised of some of the most respected operators in the world in this specific field. In -25-30°F, frost covering the ground, we practiced climbing, insertion methods on skis and snowmobiles, and slept in ice caves we built ourselves. We cut holes in the ice and jumped into the water wearing full equipment, and then worked to climb back out and prevent ourselves from becoming hypothermic. That was a brutal one.

Later, I participated in a training course held in Florida at the Hubert Field Air Base, where the fearsome AC-130 gunships were stationed. In Florida’s swamps, I directed those flying fortresses over the radio, and they pulverized the “enemy’s” tanks on the ground with their Gatling guns. I was even lucky enough to fly in one of them, and saw firsthand how the crew operated—with a combination of sophisticated technology and hard manual labor. The so-called “gunners” stood in the back of the plane and almost shoveled grenades and ammunition into the weapon system. Others sat barricaded behind monitors, operating the aircraft’s many systems, including the extremely powerful infrared spotlight, which my team and I appreciated in the Afghan mountains back in 2002.

The Corps’ education took us beyond Europe and the U.S. to some pretty exotic environments.

We practiced jungle warfare on the Indonesian island of Borneo, and also in Belize in Central America, where we stayed for weeks in the sticky heat and humidity, sleeping in hammocks among the exuberant wildlife.

A few squads were even lucky enough to train with the U.S. Delta Force in the jungle in Hawaii a couple of years ago. From inside a gigantic C-5 Galaxy, which used to be the largest transport aircraft in the U.S. Air Force, the team parachuted alongside U.S. Delta operators over the island's jungles.

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With 524 parachute jumps in my logbook, I would call myself an experienced jumper. But despite my experience, I have repeatedly learned that a freefall with a parachute is the most dangerous training we'd undertake. I hardly know any Jaegers who haven't broken a limb or been permanently injured as a result of it.

In the late summer of 2006, I found myself in a twin-engine, civilian SkyVan transport plane, 14,000 feet above the parachute training camp La Palisse in France, where the Corps liked to train given the good weather conditions. The plane held my team and six operators from the British 22<sup>nd</sup> SAS, with whom we trained.

I was about to perform a jump where I would have a 100-pounds-heavy backpack tied to the front of my body instead of where it would typically go—on the back of my legs. All equipment on the front of the body makes a jump far more unstable, and ordinarily, a drag-chute would be mounted on my rig in order to offset its effect and stabilize my fall. But not this time. I wanted to perform the jump without the stabilizing chute both for the sake of curiosity and also because I wanted to pass on my experiences to the Corps' parachute section. So I jumped out with a cameraman who filmed me during the fall.

Immediately after exiting the aircraft's ramp, I had big problems remaining stable in the air. I made myself as big as possible, spreading my legs and arms out wide. It didn't help much. The slightest movement made me almost lose control. As long as I could stay still, I was fine. But it was impossible to keep completely still when falling toward the ground at almost 125 miles per hour, knowing that within the next half minute or so, I'd have to release my chute and change position.

I decided to do a "dummy pull" to test how hard it would be. My right arm had barely changed position to grip the chute's handle when I completely lost control. I was now accelerating so rapidly that the cameraman couldn't keep up. I was tumbling around with heaven and earth spinning around me, all while desperately trying to stabilize my fall with my arms and legs. Impossible.

The centrifugal force was setting in, pushing the blood up into my head until it felt like it was going to explode. I had no idea what altitude I was at. Everything seemed unclear, and I was struggling to stay conscious. My brain, however, managed to register that the automatic safety mechanism would release the reserve chute any second if I kept going at such high speed. This couldn't happen. The reserve chute releases extremely quickly, and I would probably become entangled in the paracord. And that would mean game over.

Lying on my back, I finally managed to place both my hands on the trigger and pulled down on the handle with all my might. I prayed that the small pilot chute that pulls out the main chute wouldn't wrap itself around me. And by some kind of crazy miracle, it slipped underneath me and pushed me to the side. The parachute's cells filled up with air above my head. I regained my full sense and cursed at myself. That jump could have cost me the highest price. This was the fourth time that I'd experienced such a nearly disastrous jump. To hell with my stupid curiosity.

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On the home front, the Jaeger Corps was part of the nation's counter-terror preparedness. At least once a year, a Jaeger team would participate in the SWAT team's exercises, which often offered plenty of resources and realistic scenarios. One of the practice scenarios focused on a Stena Line passenger cruise liner that had been hijacked on its way from Frederikshavn to Gothenburg by a large number of terrorists who would begin systematically killing the hundreds of hostages on board if their requirements weren't met.

Counter-terrorist units from countries including Sweden, Norway, Germany, Holland, and Belgium participated in the exercise, which culminated in a large-scale attack on the cruise liner one early morning. The attack included Danish and German helicopters and a large number of the RIB-rubber boats that had engines with 600-900 horsepower. Prior to the attack, the Frogman Corps snuck on board and sent valuable intel about the terrorists to the units standing by on land.

Just after sunrise, the heavily armed direct action units boarded the helicopters. In a V-shaped formation they set off towards the cruise liner in low level and full speed with the morning sun behind them. The RIB-boats sailed alongside the big ship, and the operators and police officers boarded the vessel on small rope ladders fastened to metal hooks. My team and I fast-roped down onto the upper deck. It was our responsibility to eliminate the terrorists on one of the upper decks, and then fight our way through restaurants, cafes, commons areas, and from cabin to cabin.

Years of service in the army had taken its toll on my body. I had broken my nose, an arm, a

hand and fingers, wrists, ribs, broken teeth, split-open eyebrows, and now suffered chronic damage in my knees, back, and neck. The summer of 2007 brought with it an addition to that list. On our Supercat special vehicles, we had mounted KTM motocross bikes, which we had to be able to ride. I had the pleasure of getting a one-on-one lesson on one of those monsters by the squadron commander, nicknamed “The Bicep.” He was a pretty unusual man; with a past as a bodybuilder, he came equipped with a huge set of arms and a snarky personality. Along with that, he was almost pathologically obsessed with motorcycles.

With my extremely sparse experience on such a machine, the “Bicep” one day ordered me to drive through a gravel pit where I had to perform on a track covered in terrifying jumps, slopes, and deadly turns. At one of the highest jumps, I lost control of the bike and skyrocketed like a circus performer. After a number of crazy somersaults, I ended up landing on top of the beast.

The result was two broken and two bruised ribs. I fed on painkillers to take the edge off the pain. The worst thing about being injured, though, was not being able to participate in the team’s daily program.

However, my mood lifted significantly a few days later. Despite my disability, “Bicep” offered me something I couldn’t refuse. Would I participate in an upcoming mission in Iraq? I didn’t hesitate for even a second before I said yes.

## Chapter Seventeen: In deep shit

I found myself in southern Iraq in the summer of 2007. It had only been a few days since ‘OPS Viking,’ where my team had disposed of the JAM militia’s rocket cache. We had just embarked upon on a new mission in the Iraqi desert. Our mighty EH-101 transport helicopter was five minutes out from the LZ, and I found myself going through the infiltration route in my head one last time.

*One mile southeast toward the swamp. Follow the edge of the swamp for 3000 feet to the south, and then keep east until you hit the road just north of the little bunch of houses. Continue east for another half a mile until you reach the canal. From there, head a mile southeast through the palm grove until you reach the JAM militia house with the suspected weapons cache.*

The area was crawling with enemies, mainly JAM, but also other hostile militias and terrorist groups who knew that we operated in the area. Local residents sympathized with the militias, and were against us being in their country. As such, it was a complete no-go to move around during the day in an eight-men team. We wouldn’t have a chance against the numerically superior enemy if we were compromised. The night and the darkness were our best friends.

I checked my weapon, turned on my GPS, set the focus on my night vision goggles one last time, and made sure the pocket on my thigh, containing my map, was closed. I was already drenched with sweat in the 95-degree-hot night. The salty perspiration dripped from my forehead under my helmet. A little hot water from my camel bag quenched my thirst.

My broken ribs from the motorcycle accident back home in Denmark still hurt like hell, but I tried to ignore the pain. The infiltration route didn’t look that bad on the map and on the satellite images, so I was sure I’d be fine. We’d have to swim across a canal and crawl through 30 or so ditches, but they didn’t look too wide in the photos. With a little luck and skill, we would likely be on time for our helicopter pick-up in 5-6 hours.

Our target was a three-story compound surrounded by a dense palm grove in a residential area on the outskirts of a major city. The area was densely built-up and covered by a web of small streams and canals, making it extremely difficult to move unseen. The compound served as headquarters for the JAM militia. We also suspected that a large weapons cache was hidden there as well.

But satellites and spy planes hadn’t been able to gather enough intel about the compound for the bosses to launch a direct action raid. The spy planes had also observed women and children moving in and out of the target, so the bosses chose a more cautious way of approaching the situation. They wanted us as close with the house as quickly as possible, conduct a recce onsite, gleaning maximum information as a basis for a possible future direct-action mission.

“One minute,” the British loadmaster said. He sat beside me, parked behind his 7.62mm machine gun in the middle of the helicopter’s loading ramp, and held up a finger.

We touched down and he gave a ‘go’ signal. I jumped past him, sprinting down the loading ramp and into the Iraqi night, away from the big cloud of sand and pebbles. Immediately after, the helicopter disappeared—a black lump against the starry night sky, giving off a faint hum in the distance. The silence after disembarking always seemed a little surreal after the deafening noise of the helicopter.

This was a very vulnerable phase in the operation. The nearest settlement of houses wasn’t more than a mile away, and the helicopter had most definitely been heard. JAM knew that they had unwelcome guests.

“Forward,” our team leader Kenneth said, his voice low in my earpiece.

I flipped my rifle’s safety to *fire* and began heading southeast along the sandy plain, my closest companion Rasmus walked directly behind me and the rest of my team followed 60-80 feet farther behind us.

I really appreciated my teammates, not only for their professional ability and experience, but for their character, too. All seven of them were cool and composed—exemplary soldiers. Kenneth was one of these first-class soldiers. Redheaded and temperamental, he’d been a soldier in the army for more than half of his life, including more than five years deployed in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Rasmus, who was in charge of demolitions and breaching, was a physical wonder boy and was always very relaxed. Søren was the youngest in the team at 26 years old. He was our forward air controller. Our paramedic, Frederik, had been wounded the year before in Afghanistan by a fragment of a mortar grenade. He’d nearly bled to death. In the Danish army, soldiers are covered by an insurance policy (believe it or not) should they get wounded in action. Frederik, to give you some sense of what kind of guy he was, chose to spend his \$5,000 on a party for the team. Our second paramedic, Christian, was another redheaded, temperamental dude, one who I grew to become close friends with. John, our comms guy, was a tranquil country boy and a highly respected Jaeger, just like our sniper, Hans.

We kept a wary eye on our surroundings, the world bathed in green through our night vision goggles. There didn’t seem to be any signs of activity in the area. Only barking dogs and the voice from the speakers of the mosques. The flames from the numerous oil refineries lit up as large bright dots in my NVGs, and I had to turn my head to avoid getting blinded. Not a breeze.

I had laid out our route in such a way that we could move quickly away from the local settlements. Where there were houses, there were people. Where there were people, there were enemies, and where there were enemies, there were problems. As a result, we soon found ourselves

moving along a swamp-like lake. We followed it south, just far enough from the water to stay on dry soil and avoid leaving tracks. Occasionally, Rasmus and I would kneel, listen, and look for human activity. We could hear noises from vehicles and voices, and see glowing cigarettes from a long distance—they were floating dots of light in the green of our goggles.

After passing the swampy area, I turned east toward the road, where the canal flowed. We weren't more than a some hundred feet from the nearest houses. I almost jumped when I noticed a man on one of the rooftops. I knelt slowly, buried my weapon into my shoulder, clicked my radio button twice—the signal that this was not just a regular stop, but one where something was actually going on.

The man on the roof was observing the area in our direction. He held his hands in front of his face as if he were holding a telescope. If he had night vision, he had most definitely noticed us. But that wasn't likely. We knew that very few JAM units had night vision of any kind.

Suddenly, a couple of wild dogs began barking a few hundred feet away. The guy stood completely still, as if the barking of the dogs had caught his interest. He hadn't moved at all since I noticed him. I didn't like it. He had most certainly heard the helicopter, and knew we were in the area. Rasmus and I tried to take up as little space as possible by sitting in a sort of fetal position. And then, finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the sentry moved his arms and calmly strolled over the other side of the roof, beginning to observe southward, away from us. I got up slowly and continued down the road half a mile.

Pairing off in buddy teams, we carefully crossed the road and were now at the edge of a large palm grove, which lead us to the target about two miles to the east. I quietly moved to the edge of the canal with Rasmus in order to see any enemy activity on the opposite shore, as well as to assess how deep and wide the canal was and how powerful the current.

We had a specific procedure for how to cross a canal. It was an extremely vulnerable stage; we would be in deep shit if we came in contact with the enemy while in the water, with part of our equipment wrapped in plastic. We couldn't simply jump in and splash our way to the other side.

Rasmus and I were the first ones to swim across. The edge of the canal stood almost six feet high—a vertical wall of mud—and I needed help from the team's muscle man, Søren, who with his enormous arms helped me into the water. I gave a quiet grunt in pain as my ribs rubbed against the mud wall, my body sliding into the canal water. It was hot and stunk of something rotten. When I finally get a foothold at the bottom of the canal, I discovered that I needed to pull my boots toward me with each step. The bottom of the canal was swampy, and it was almost like suction cups pulling at my feet.

Slowly, Rasmus and I swam to the opposite bank. Even without my plate carrier on, my boots and my uniform felt heavy. But things were about to become much worse. The current was much



stronger than we had anticipated. We couldn't keep a straight course toward the point I had intended on the opposite shore. The stream took us farther down the canal and worryingly far away from the rest of our team.

We struggled to swim upstream while still trying to observe the opposite shore through our goggles. Huffing and puffing, we finally reached the opposite shore and pulled ourselves up using roots and vegetation. We silently hid in the tall grass, observing and listening. Silently, we put our gear back on. I blinked twice with my infrared light to signal to the others that they could send over the next two-buddy team. It took a little over half an hour to get everyone over. After roughly thirty minutes, the team was ready to move on. Meanwhile, the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) Shadow, which had been circling 9000 feet above us for the duration of the operation, reported lots of enemy activity in the area.

We continued through the dense palm grove, and I flipped my night vision goggles up to take a look around. The palm grove looked like a postcard or a theatrical set with a huge, low-hanging orange moon, making all the palm trees stand out in sharp silhouettes. The background noise was filled by the evening prayers of the many mosques and barking dogs, which seemed to be getting closer. After a few hundred feet, the palm grove became denser with bushes and shrubs, forcing us to drastically slow down. And even worse: It increased our noise level.

I reached the first ditch and worriedly looked it over. In the photographs, they'd looked pretty doable, but now I was standing in front of a six-foot-wide ditch with vertical sides, the water levels between four and six feet below the edge. Moreover, both sides of the ditch were covered in barbed wire. It must have been intended to demarcate a private plot.

As the rest of the team caught up, Kenneth growled angrily at the sight. Not only did it complicate our infiltration, but it also delayed it. Time was becoming a factor, too. We'd planned on being eyes on target within the hour. I wasn't sure if we'd make it in time.

Søren was in contact with the UAV overhead, which reported activity in front of some compounds at the edge of the palm grove only about a few hundred feet ahead of us. We sharpened our senses.

"Forward," Kenneth whispered.

We were just over one mile from the target. I moved toward the wire and tried to put a boot onto it to press it down, but it sprung back. I almost lost balance and toppled over. Instead, I tried to separate the twisted arms of wire with Rasmus. I cursed at myself for having left my gloves behind. I cut myself on both hands, but I couldn't be concerned with that at the moment. It was my own damn fault, anyway.

We got through the wire and moved to the edge of a ditch. From there, we needed to get into the

water as quietly as possible. If I just jumped in, I would make too much noise. Instead, I found some roots protruding from the ditch's side and decided to use them to gently lower myself into the water. Rasmus laid down on his stomach and helped me in. When he couldn't lower me any further, he slipped his rifle toward me. I grabbed onto it to support myself. When I reached the water, I dug my fingers into the mud in order to keep from falling in too quickly.

The water was warm. I slid down until it reached my neck. An awful stench filled my nostrils, both sweet and sour—the putrid stench of feces and urine, and it almost caused me to puke. It dawned on me that I was swimming across the community sewer. I was literally neck-deep in shit!

Fighting against the strong urge to vomit, I struggled not to go under in the nasty water. Not only would it be a deeply unpleasant experience, but my equipment was also too heavy for me to swim—I'd drown. I chose to push myself off of the muddy wall in hope of reaching the other side of the ditch six feet across. I succeeded and managed a foothold with one of my boots. With one hand, I held on to a small root and stabilized myself. I kept my other arm above the water with my rifle at all times. Turning to the other side, I saw Rasmus and some of the others observing me with concerned faces. I couldn't get out without help and waved Rasmus toward me.

A minute later, he was hanging beside me on the mud wall, and despite the disgusting situation, we exchanged a couple of white-tooth grins from our dirty and sweaty faces. Our conditions were grotesque. But there was nothing else to do but move forward quickly. The clock was ticking.

Rasmus pushed my behind with all his might, and I tried to climb the six-foot-high wall. I found two roots near my shoulders for handholds, and I began pulling myself up with all my power. My ribs pressed against the ditch wall, shooting a bolt of pain through me so intense, my vision went blurry for a second. I climbed farther up and became infuriated when I realized there was barbed wire along this side of the ditch as well, and that the only thing I could reach to pull myself the rest of the way up was a piece of wire. I clenched my jaw, grabbed the wire both hands, and got to it. The wire dug into my flesh, and I could feel blood—thick and warm—streaming out from between my fingers. When I reached the edge, I pushed the wire apart and crawled through it, keeping my head down so my helmet would protect my face.

By the time I'd reached the other side, my goggles had become completely fogged up, and I could only see the outline of the terrain around me. Not good, since I was the scout and was supposed to evaluate our way forward.

I helped the cursing Rasmus through the barbed wire, and slowly, the other frustrated faces of my crew popped up over the edge. This was hard work. Really hard. The combination of plate carrier, rifle, grenades, ammo, and other equipment weighed at least 70 pounds.

I checked the GPS. We were one mile from the target, and according to the aerial photos, there were ditches crossing our path approximately every 300 feet. If they were all like the shit hole we just made it through, we were in for a hell of a twisted comedy.

We moved carefully through the palm grove. I placed each step carefully at the sides of the small path to minimize our tracks.

Another ditch, almost identical to the first one. Shit. I scanned the ditch and the barbed wire, but there were no alternative routes. Again, I climbed through the barbed wire with my torn-up hands, slipped down into the sewer, and popped back out onto the other side with Rasmus and the rest of the team behind me. The ditches went on like that. The infiltration had turned into a kind of fresh hell—some kind of weird hurdle race in slow motion, smeared with urine and feces. And it pushed us to the limit of our physical abilities. My chest pain got worse and worse with every movement. I had the familiar taste of blood in my mouth, which occurs when some of the blood vessels in the lungs burst due to intense overuse. My focus as a scout was getting dangerously weak.

About 600 feet away from our target, I was once again neck-deep in shit when Rasmus whispered to be completely quiet. I looked up and spotted Kenneth and Hans completely static, their rifles ready. There was a white light flickering from one of the nearest houses about 100 feet away. This was a really terrible place to be compromised, especially for me. I wouldn't be able to get out of the ditch quickly enough in case of a fight. I could hear muffled voices, and the light grew stronger. They were getting closer.

Kenneth and Hans slowly laid down, flat on their stomachs, and pressed themselves underneath some bushes at the edge of the ditch. I couldn't see anyone else. The beam of light moved along the barbed wire and along the bushes where Kenneth and Hans were lying. The beam stopped. I could hear a faint murmur of male voices about 50-60 feet away. The beam continued along the ditch. From their current angle, the men couldn't shine their light on me. They would have to get closer to the ditch. Then, abruptly, they turned off the light, spoke to each other loudly, and disappeared.

The relief of not being caught gave me renewed strength. I climbed out of the ditch and oriented myself. The target should have been at 11 o'clock in relation to our position, and a quick glance confirmed it. Only a barbed-wire fence stood between our target and us.

I kneeled and waited for the others, adjusting my goggles and following the contours of the compound with my eyes. The place was about 100 feet away from me, surrounded by palm trees and shrubs.

The palm grove was thinner here, and there was a network of small paths running through the yard. From our surveillance pictures, I knew there was a gravel road in front of the compound and more

settlements to the left. To the right there was a 50-foot-wide canal. And behind us stood countless more shit-ditches. If we did get into a firefight, our routes of escape were almost nonexistent. The only getaway route was backwards, along the canal, toward a little wooden bridge that lead into another area of the village.

Prior to the mission, we'd been informed that there were probably six men and six women in the house at night. Søren signaled us with his hands that the UAV overhead had eyes on two people in front of the house and possibly on the rooftop. I noticed that his face was drenched in sweat, likely from the combined weight of his headset and the heavy radio equipment on his back. It must have been a nightmare for him to climb through the ditches.

With slow, small steps, I moved forward along the little path toward the target, looking for the guards ahead. At the same time, I watched for the guards in the courtyard in front of the compound and on the rooftop, all the while praying that there was no dog in the yard. Only a small number of trees and shrubs stood between me and the target, and something that looked like a pile of compost. I strived to choose the firmest ground to walk on so as to minimize my tracks, but here in the quiet night, I chose the soft spots at the edge of the path instead, so that my boots wouldn't make any noise on the gravel. The price of this was, of course, that they would be able to see that we'd been here later, but for the moment, it was only important that we didn't get discovered.

After a few feet, I saw the guards. Through a small gap in the trees, I spotted the glow of a cigarette. The dot lit up when the guard inhaled. He was leaning against a wall not 30 feet from me. Another guard crouched next to a metal gate, which seemed to be the only visible entrance to the courtyard.

Silently, I inched closer. More of the house came into view. I saw that both men had AK-47s hanging from their shoulders.

The guard by the wall tossed his cigarette to the ground and crushed it with his boot. The other guard stood up slowly, mumbled a few words to his partner, and disappeared into the house. There were still no signs of any guards on the roof.

If Søren were to receive a warning from the UAV of a sudden and unexpected threat, such as more guards appearing on the roof or on the other side of the house, he would repeatedly press the radio to let us know that there were problems and we must be prepared. I was now almost entirely within the small gap between the trees, and could see that there were a few old cars in the courtyard, as well as piles of metal scraps. A nine-foot-high wall surrounded the yard. Only the side leading toward the palm grove—towards me—was open.

I moved one of my feet half a step forward and tried to feel where the soil was soft.

A twig snapped as I planted my boot on the ground. I froze.

The remaining guard swiveled around and looked straight toward me. It seemed as though we were staring into each other's eyes. I kept absolutely still and hoped that the others had noticed what was going on and wouldn't move.

The guard swept his AK to the front of his body and approached the row of trees I was standing behind. It was too late to do anything now. I couldn't kneel or go backward without making noise that would compromise my position.

Slowly, the guard moved along the trees and blinked into the dark shrubbery. I gently flicked off the safety on my rifle and placed my finger on the trigger. I knew that the green light from my goggles faintly lit up my eye sockets, and I hoped he didn't notice.

He stopped a few feet in front of me. We were literally staring each other down. If he raised his AK toward me, I was ready to pull the trigger. My heart was pounding. I actually feared he could hear it. The moment seemed to last forever, and the leg that I'd been leaning on began to shake from the weight of my body.

Finally, he turned his head and returned to the side of the house, where he sat down on the stoop and took out a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. He pulled one out with his teeth and lit it. My heart rate slowly returned to normal, and I kneeled to relax my leg a bit.

It seemed unlikely that we'd find the weapons cache, hidden somewhere around this location, according to our sources. An active attempt to locate it would certainly cause so much noise that the guards would hear us. So it all boiled down to memorizing all the details of the house: placement of doors and windows, what material they were made of, whether there was glass in the window frames, thickness of the walls and what material they were made of, how many stories, any access roads to the house, whether the gate was closed, whether the roof was flat, and how much ammunition I estimated the guards carried. These details were essential in case of a future direct action raid on the compound.

Two clicks in my earpiece interrupted my observation. We were running out of time and still had to link up at Søren's position. If I walked backward, I ran the risk of tripping over something and blowing the whole thing. So I slowly turned around and used the same trail as before to move toward the silhouettes of the rest of my team, which I could only just glimpse behind some bushes about 60 feet behind me. We exchanged a thumbs-up sign, assurance that we've collected valuable information to bring home.

Arriving at the first ditch, we kneeled in a circle around Kenneth, who was to brief us on our exfiltration—our way back to the pick-up LZ. Fortunately, the route back through the ditches was to be excluded from our plan. We simply didn't have time, since there was only an hour before pick up. We

had to select an alternate plan. Instead, we'd walk along the canal down to the little wooden bridge. The problem with this idea was that it led directly into a densely populated area on the outskirts of the village. We didn't have a choice. Even with the revised plan, we'd be pushing it to reach the LZ within the hour.

Everyone nodded and we got into formation: me as point man, closely followed by Rasmus and the rest of the team. We wouldn't be able to avoid at least a couple of ditches, but it was an uplifting thought that we wouldn't have to overcome more than three. When we reached the bridge, which was really just a single wood plank, I spent a few minutes observing it before I ventured onto it by myself.

The village began about 60 feet from a small gravel path. We tried to avoid moving through settlements, even in the middle of the night, but we were under extreme pressure to meet our exfil. To our luck, the little gravel path had only two small street lamps, and there was no sign of activity from either animals or humans.

We spread onto both sides of the street to better cover each other diagonally. We got down the street without any problems and continued west toward the helicopter's landing zone—a large, flat plain about a mile away. 500 feet away from the village I did a little maneuver called a “loop,” which took the team around in an arc back toward the village. I then found a suitable place for us to position ourselves and detect any ‘dickers,’ or followers. Fortunately there weren't any.

Twenty minutes later, we arrived at the LZ and Søren contacted the helicopter.

“Two minutes out.”

I ventured forward and knelt where I wanted the helicopter to land. When I finally heard the sound of the rotor blades, I turned on the infrared strobe on my helmet so the pilot could see my exact position. I moved my muddy goggles to protect my eyes against the dust, sand, and stones the helicopter would disturb as it landed.

The roaring black chunk appeared out of the darkness and set out to land with its nose wheel right in front of me. I'd experienced this countless times, and instinctively leaned forward to avoid getting blown back by turbulence from the chopper's rotors.

This pick-up phase was my favorite. It was the same feeling as getting picked up from school by your dad as a little boy. Safe and secure. The helicopter's loadmaster stepped out onto the loading ramp and blinked with his infrared lamp twice.

I got up straightaway and ran along the body of the helicopter, up the loading ramp, and onto a seat at the bottom of the darkened cabin. The rest of the team was right behind me, and only a few seconds later, the turbines roared and the helicopter rose into the air.

We weren't home at the base yet, so we couldn't take off our equipment, helmets, or weapons

yet. But we could relax our aching bodies. My ribs hurt whenever I moved, and only now did I realize how deep and bloody the wounds in my hands were. I looked up and saw the two British loadmasters gesticulating gagging motions with their hands on their throats. We smelled *bad*. I could see Hans and Søren laughing. It didn't bother me, either.

## **Chapter Eighteen: Invisible in the militia's backyard**

After nursing my wounded hands and my sore ribs for a couple of days, I once again prepared a route back into and out of JAM country. It was time for another mission.

Massive rocket attacks on Basra Air Station (BAS) during the winter and spring of 2007 wore heavily on the Danish and British soldiers stationed there. Over the previous 24 hours alone, the Danish camp—only the size of 10 football pitches—had been attacked 14 times, primarily during the night, when the enemy could launch the rockets without being seen.

As a result, no one moved around the camp without a helmet and a plate carrier on. When the camp's radar system alerted everyone of an incoming rocket attack, we had about 15 to 30 seconds to take cover behind a wall or in a safety bunker. If you were driving a car, you had to stop and lie down beside the car. And if there was no cover available, one just had to throw himself down on the ground and hope for the best.

Every time there was a rocket attack, camp inhabitants were told not to move around until an EOD team had searched the area for unexploded ordnance. The threat and the constant state of vigilance made those on base feel stressed, and as a result they slept lighter and for less time, and consequently didn't rejuvenate properly. Many slept wearing their boots and all their equipment so they could react faster when they needed to seek shelter, and some had even begun to sleep in the security bunkers. But they were boiling hot, and people didn't sleep well in them. Many of the young soldiers in the camp were beginning to be seriously affected by the situation, and the morale had become noticeably challenged in the recent weeks.

Finally, something was being done about it. I was called in as part of two Jaeger teams assigned to recon the areas from where the rockets were being launched, and if possible, prevent further launches by taking out the enemy and any rockets we came across.

A large part of the enemy's rockets, guns, and ammunition were likely smuggled from Iran into Iraq through the desolate desert border outside the coalition forces' stationing. We knew of the problem, but were forced to recognize that the coalition simply couldn't guard all of the hundreds of miles comprising the country's border in effort to prevent Iranian supplies from reaching JAM and other Iraqi militias.

Our task was difficult. It went beyond finding a needle in a haystack. It was already a challenge just to find the haystack. The area surrounding BAS was vast and stretched across the desert, swamps, marshes, and settlements. From the intel we had, however, we knew approximately what areas were most commonly used for launching and when the rockets were typically placed. When they were



launched, it was rarely the enemies themselves standing on the pad, initiating the strike. They mostly used timers, and then sat quietly at home with the family when the rockets launched.

The area that we'd concentrate on first was a marshy swamp area. It was very remote, and the militias were using it to launch rockets, as well as to bury rockets, grenades, and ammunition in caches.

After that, we'd move two to three miles farther south to a flat agricultural area, which stood directly next to a large, desert-like plain. The population density was a problem in this spot. Farmers moved through the area daily with their cattle in order to let them graze and drink from the labyrinths of small irrigation canals. About a mile to the south, there stood a larger city. This area was so densely populated, it would be impossible not to be seen and our mission compromised. We couldn't go all the way there.

In general, the area was highly infected with JAM militia, as well as a patchwork of other militias—mostly rival Shia Muslim clans and criminal gangs who would fight bloody and merciless battles of power on the local stage. The last thing we wanted to do was to land in the midst of their battlefield.

Oddly enough, these groups already knew the Jaeger Corps were operating in the area. We had been advertised relentlessly in the Danish media in the weeks before our departure. The headlines proclaimed that the Corps would be deployed into southern Iraq. *Fuckers*.

We were not on our home turf and didn't want to take any chances. We could remain undetected for four or five days at most. To maximize firepower, we combined two teams with shooters predominately over the age of 30 and with extensive operational experience. Initially, we would operate as one unit, and then we'd split up and move into two different areas where we'd stay for four days to observe the locations we believed the rockets were being launched from.

We packed food, water, guns, ammunition, grenades, night vision goggles, batteries, observation equipment, radios, and GPS. Lots of equipment, but in contrast to operations in Afghanistan, these operations in Iraq were shorter, which meant less equipment and more importantly, less water, which made for a much lighter backpack.

I looked over the route and memorized it one last time, took a shower, covered myself in a strong British jungle mosquito lotion, and rubbed my arms, hands, and face in a black paint. I checked my rifle one last time, my ammo and grenades, my goggles, and the gear on my plate carrier.

I was good to go.

After the helicopter dropped us off in the vast desert plain, we set out walking behind the other team, headed north toward the marsh area where the militias operated. I flipped my goggles up. The

nights in Iraq were simply fascinating: a completely static landscape with a huge yellow moon and thousands of stars in the sky that seemed to be so much bigger here.

The idyll was broken when I let myself slide into a ditch of stagnant, dirty water to examine how deep it was. As the team's scout, it was my job to examine the obstacles we encountered. The foul water reached my chest, and I continued slowly toward the other shore a few feet away where I wrapped my hands around some roots and pulled myself out. The others followed me, and when the whole team assembled on the other side of the ditch, I heard Martin's low voice in my earpiece.

Martin was the other team's scout, and stood about 150 feet ahead of us. He was observing a small house, located where a wide ditch crossed a long, straight dirt road. He had spotted a couple of armed militia with a Russian 14.5mm heavy machine gun on the roof. It didn't seem like they had night vision capabilities, which made our situation more favorable. That said, we were 16 men, and even the subtlest noise would expose us.

The discipline of sound was essential in missions like this. Every step had to be taken carefully, and all equipment had to be fastened tightly to one's plate carrier so nothing would rattle. Metal against metal, a twig snapping, a small splash in the water, and we'd be exposed. And in this area, we couldn't expect any kind of mercy. Their weapons were there to be used. They would not hesitate to use them on us. Actually, they'd be more than happy to break their boring guard routine with a heavy exchange of fire.

But we weren't here to fight with random militias. On the contrary, we were here to find the place from which the rockets were being launched, and do it without being seen. If the circumstances allowed us to get rid of a rocket-firing team or two, that would just be a nice bonus.

Morten announced that he and his battle buddy would move toward the house and assess the possibilities for us to pass by it and continue deeper into the area. We sent our two machine gunners, armed with their H&K 7.62 mm, ahead to position themselves, ready to open fire on the guards on the rooftop should Morten be seen. The rest of us took position underneath a low row of shrubs and bushes.

Approximately ten minutes later, Morten reported that it wasn't possible to pass by the houses without being detected from the rooftops. The two guards seemed vigilant, and it would be too great a risk to attempt sneaking 16 armed men past them. So we decided to split up. The other team set out toward the dry eastern part of the area, and my team—naturally—headed toward the wet and swampy west.

As team scout, I would now have to study my map. I found the densest bush around, crawled as far as I could inside it, pulled out my poncho liner, and covered myself in it to make sure that no light could escape. Then, I turned on my little red light and scanned my map.

The scout was the only one in the team allowed to use light as I did now. Every Jaeger was trained that way. On selection course many years ago, I watched many poor guys dragging large rocks and other heavy objects around for weeks as punishment for not complying with the basic, but essential, light and sound discipline.

On an exercise in Belgium in the early 1990s, I was in charge of communications and was struggling with a bad connection to the home base. I was hidden underneath my poncho liner, used in the same way I used it now—to prevent light from getting out. I had not slept for several days, and at one point I had to pee so badly, I decided to pause in my work and tiptoe out into the darkness of the night to the little hole we'd dug for a toilet. As I slowly lifted my poncho, I was surprised to find that the sun was shining brightly in the sky. Damn, it had been dark in there.

After I memorized the route to the swamp area, I packed up my map and my poncho. I somehow found it hard to imagine rocket launchers in that area. But a small bright spot on the satellite images showed that there was a dry area with a network of paths leading to it. It was so isolated and remote that it could very well have been a launch site.

We ventured forward to our objective. Behind me was Rasmus, the team's explosives guy. He carried a suppressor on his rifle so he could shoot barking dogs that we might encounter. The two of us were the vanguards, and we stayed 100 to 150 feet in front of the others.

After just a quarter of a mile, we entered an area where we were surrounded by tall reed plants that grew on both sides of the path. Suddenly, the path stopped, and I found myself looking directly into a 30-foot-wide canal.

After another wet pleasure. I knelt down and listened for any sounds that might seem out of place. Nothing. I turned around and signaled to the others that everything was okay. I looked at my wrist compass, located northwest, and followed a small path—little more than a mud track. My boots sank in deeply every time I took a step. Sweat ran from my forehead underneath my helmet, and I could taste the salty drops on my lips.

We came across another canal. And so it continued. We had barely crossed another canal, ditch, or small lake, before we would encounter a new one I'd need to go down and check out. Apparently, this was a source of great entertainment for the others, because whenever I turned around, I'd see seven sets of white teeth gleaming in the darkness behind me.

I'd curse silently and creep into yet another waterhole. As I crawled up the opposite bank, the mud track seemed to widen slightly, and I could see the terrain better through my night vision goggles as a clearing appeared.

We'd arrived at the suspected launch pad. It couldn't have been more than 60x90 feet in size,

with a couple of paths leading to it. We combed through every square foot. Unfortunately, there were no signs that there had ever been a rocket here. If we could have confirmed it as a rocket launch area, then the UAV above us would begin to monitor the spot, and a fighter jet or an AC-130 could handle the rest.

It was almost 2 a.m. and time was running short. We were to link up with the other team at 3 a.m. and continue the three or four miles south to set up an observation base. At about 6 a.m., the skyline would grow brighter. We'd have to be in place by then.

When we linked up with the other team, the two team leaders quickly exchanged intel and sent what we'd learned back to camp. The rest of us secured the area. I drank some water and ate an energy bar. I was drenched after having been in water most of the night, but wasn't at all cold. I was actually covered in sweat. The night was 95 degrees hot.

Five minutes later, we headed south toward the observation area without the other team. The landscape quickly changed, and a large desert-like plain unfolded in front of us, disrupted only by berms and dry ditches. I knew that the plain stopped after a few miles bordering cultivated land, and about three miles ahead of us, the city began.

This terrain required a very different way of moving. We couldn't seek shelter behind or underneath any vegetation, and were completely exposed in the open landscape. At the same time, the moon shined so brightly that we casted obvious shadows. I tried to lead my men through the terrain as tactically and as carefully as possible, going through every hollow and sticking to the shadows of the sand embankments. But it was risky business. If the enemy were in possession of even the most primitive night vision binoculars and found himself in the right place, he could easily identify us. It wasn't normal for JAM and other militias to have that kind of equipment, but unfortunately, we'd learned that a few of their units had either fully modern or old Russian night vision goggles.

As always, when I was patrolling, my rifle's safety was off. The second it took to release the safety during an ambush or when suddenly in contact with the enemy could be the second that decides life or death.

If we were to get ambushed, it was my responsibility as point man to decide what to do. The team leader behind me couldn't assess the situation properly from his point of view. I could choose to push forward and engage the enemy, but they would have to be numerically inferior to us and I would really have to be sure of my case, since it was a risky decision—if the enemy had greater numbers than I first thought, we would run right into a quick death.

Therefore, it would be more likely for me to choose to pull back under supporting fire—to “box,” as we called it. This meant the team splits into two: One half would deliver suppressive fire

while the other half ran 60-90 feet back and got into a firing position. In this way, we could cover each other while retreating.

We had trained in this technique countless times with live ammunition in realistic training scenarios. Aggression was the keyword. In such a situation, each man simply had to bring out his wildest, darkest, and most aggressive side of his personality and attempt to deliver as much violence in the direction of the enemy in the shortest time possible. When we'd practiced this technique, it was not unusual for us to fire several thousand rounds, 20-30 HE grenades, smoke grenades, and 40mm grenades, all in a matter of 5 to 10 minutes. It didn't matter if we spent most of our ammunition. It was a situation where the only important thing was survival.

I checked my wrist compass and noted that we were moving in the right direction on a small dirt road. We had to cross the road into the agricultural area, where we were to set up our observation base.

I froze when we hit the gravel road. Through my goggles I could see a car with no lights on, quietly rolling down the road toward our position. I slowly knelt and made myself as small as possible. With my right hand I pressed the radio key repeatedly to signal everyone else to stop immediately.

Rasmus and I were in the middle of a plain, only about 50 feet from the road. And the car wasn't more than 300 feet away from us, now. To drive 3 to 6 miles-per-hour without lights on wasn't normal. They weren't driving home with a hot pizza. They were clearly out hunting for us.

The militias had heard our helicopter in the area and had activated their network.

The car approached. Rasmus and I couldn't sit there, so we opted to lie down on our stomachs, push off our backpacks, and shove them to the corner of the gravel path. I remained completely still, and could feel the vein in my neck thumping against the strap of my helmet. The car came to a halt 60-80 meters in front of us. If they had night vision goggles, they would be able to spot us easily at this distance. But I knew how hard it was to observe anything in the darkness from a car—both with and without night-vision capability.

The car stood there, dark and motionless, and I could hear a slight humming from the engine. It set itself in motion again and rolled onwards, but stopped right next to us, not more than 45 feet away. I avoided any movement and didn't even turn my head to face the car—I just stared at it out of the corner of my eye.

I caressed my rifle's trigger. If they opened the door, I was more than ready to empty my first magazine.

But the engine roared again, and the car began to drive on. I turned my head and could now see the silhouettes of four people in the car. It kept driving down the road. I took a few deep breaths to

control my breathing. Although this situation didn't end in a firefight, it hadn't guaranteed that they didn't see us. They might be unsure of how many and how strong we were and had chosen instead to return later with backup, or maybe they were waiting for daylight to trap us in more difficult conditions.

"MC right," Rasmus whispered, just as I was about to announce "forward" over the radio.

I turned my head and saw a motorcycle, again without lights on, gliding down the road toward us. I pressed myself all the way down into the ground again. The motorcyclist kept his pace and didn't slow down. When he passed us, I could see that he had a Kalashnikov hanging from his shoulder.

This was a really shitty place to be, and we knew we had to get out of here as soon as possible. I waited for another minute and then quietly commanded "forward" over the radio.

Rasmus and I pulled our backpacks back on and continued across the road, venturing into a cultivated area plastered with thousands of small canals and ditches. 1500 feet ahead, we found a little spot in the midst of the vegetation that was suitable for our observation base. We could press ourselves down in the daylight and observe the road. We made contact with our UAV, Shadow, which began monitoring the area around us and the road leading to it. We decided to leave the base in the evening to get closer to the road, where we could stop suspicious vehicles and attack if necessary. Plus, we were close to other locations that might have been used as launch positions, and if we were to receive any reports from Shadow about enemy activity, we could reach them within 15 to 25 minutes.

Dawn would break in about an hour. If we didn't hide properly before then, the farmers would see us immediately. We put two guys on guard, while the rest of the team collected palm leaves from the surrounding groves. We constructed a dense fence of leaves around our little base, which, with its 10x10 feet area, was barely big enough for eight grown men with backpacks. There was a wide irrigation canal around us that kept anyone from reaching us without crossing it. This hopefully meant that neither humans nor animals could come too close without us knowing about it. Just to be safe, Rasmus set up some claymore anti-personnel mines around us, which could be triggered from inside the base.

Now it was only about waiting and hoping that we were in the right place at the right time for an opportunity to end a rocket team. I wasn't on first watch, so I rolled out my sleeping mat and placed it up against my backpack, ate a few biscuits with a thick layer of peanut butter, and closed my eyes.

The next thing I felt was someone pulling at my arm. Hans, lying on his stomach, looked me straight in the eye and held his index finger in front of his mouth. I looked around. Everyone was lying on their stomachs with their weapons ready. John was pointing into the field and held up two fingers, signaling that two men were approaching.

As they came closer, we saw that they were unarmed. They were most likely farmers out herding cattle. They were no direct threat, though it would still be a critical problem if they did discover us. If they were to get away following their discovery, they would undoubtedly tell everyone about us when they got back. And whether those they told were friends or enemies, their knowledge about our whereabouts would spread like rings in water. And if we are unlucky, there could be a massive militia force en route toward us within the following hour. But if we took them hostage, their families would come looking for them, and then we would have another problem. If they did discover us, we would have to pull back. For now, our observation base had to stand its ground.

They men stopped only 30 or 45 feet from us, and I could hear them talking. I immediately thought of our track marks from when we were gathering the palm leaves. If they saw those monster imprints from a size 47 Jaeger boot, they would know that the coalition's soldiers had been in the area.

Everyone stayed completely still. I looked out through a hole in the palm leaves and could see them very clearly. They were looking directly at us. But they didn't seem to notice anything, because they kept chatting and continued on toward a couple of cows a bit farther down. Everyone let out a breath of relief, knowing now that we'd done well concealing our observation base.

The time we spent in the base seemed painfully long, mostly because of the heat. I'd been in hot observation bases many times before, but this was the first time I felt such a relentless sun. I felt the burn throughout my entire body—only the tips of my boots were in the shade, and my mouth was as dry as a pinecone. We had only seven liters of water for each day. It wasn't enough. Hans, our sniper, had just measured the temperature with his Suunto watch. It read 122°F! Far too hot to sleep. I found myself a small branch with leaves and waved it in front of my face like a fat lady at an outdoor opera performance.

Our team's redheaded team leader, Kenneth, seemed to be particularly affected by the sun. Not surprising given his pale skin. I looked at him and couldn't help but grin. He looked like a shriveled raisin, lying there, staring absently into the distance. But Kenneth was a disciplined professional, and he would never complain. Despite the heat, there was no way we were taking off our boots or jackets. If we were compromised, we would have to leave the base within seconds, and we couldn't spend that precious time lacing up our boots and putting on our jackets.

After a nasty and exhaustingly hot day, we eagerly awaited the setting sun—looking forward to the drop in temperature to a tolerable level. We also knew that at night, we could finally get back into action. That thought improved our morale a little bit.

During the day, we'd noticed a pickup truck driving back and forth on the road; it had come by our position eight times with several people. It had a tarpaulin covering the back, which seemed very

suspicious. So much so, we decided to lie down next to the road and stop it if it passed by again. This was a bit of a gamble, but we estimated that it was worth the risk.

Finally, darkness set in. I strapped my goggles to my helmet, covered my neck, head, and hands in a thick layer of mosquito lotion, and prepared my rifle to the night. It had just gotten completely dark when we all crept out from the base and toward the road. We found a suitable position at the edge of a ditch about 60-75 feet away from the road, and positioned ourselves in line. From here, we could quickly move to the road and stop the suspicious pickup.

The night progressed, and nothing appeared in the darkness: no pickup trucks, no other cars, and no people. Frustrated, we returned to the base again as the sky began to brighten in the east. We never saw the pickup again.

The following night, lying on my back atop my sleeping pad, I waited for my turn to stand guard. I looked up at the thousands of stars in that vast sky and listened to the faint sounds of barking dogs and mosques in the distance. Although we hadn't really hit the jackpot yet, I felt really good. Everything was so simple here. So perfectly black and white. Surrounded by my brothers, all of us with a common goal and none of the everyday bullshit to hold us back. We were focused on the job.

I closed my eyes and dozed off. But a deep, hollow bang woke me shortly after. I jumped up. The sky to the south was illuminated by the blast of a rocket. Then, another bang of the same magnitude followed by more lights in the sky. They couldn't be more than half a mile away. I looked around. Everyone was sitting half-upright, wide awake and anxious to know whether this could actually develop into an exciting night.

It basically took the rockets 30-40 seconds to reach the camp. First, we'd hear the bang of the launch in the distance and shortly after, the second one—most likely the sound of the rocket striking our camp.

JAM and the other militia apparently didn't fire the rockets where Shadow had observed.

We radioed the camp and learned that there had indeed been two detonations in the British part of the camp. Fortunately there were no reports of any dead or wounded.

Now, we were on edge. We wanted to help the soldiers in camp so damn much, and we wanted to catch these bastards in the act. But we had to recognize that this was an extremely difficult task. The area was too large and we were too few. We had a pretty strong suspicion that the enemy was aware of our presence, but instead of confronting us, they just relocated and fired their rockets from somewhere else.

On the fourth day, we once again had unwelcome guests. We'd had farmers and other locals



walk past us no less than six times. One time, the guy wasn't more than 15 or 20 meters from us when he stopped and stood, staring into the air while scratching his crotch.

Now it was a farmer with cows who strolled past us. We were still on our toes when the locals came near, but by now we had faith in our camouflage job. Unless, of course, it was just that the locals were all exceptionally inobservant. It actually felt as though the cows noticed us more than their owners. A thin cow, one we quickly christened Nora, came right up to our fence of leaves and stood there staring at us with her huge brown eyes, thoughtfully grazing. When she moved on, she took her owner with her and we could relax a little.

The afternoon sun was frying us. My feet felt like they were going to burst in my boots. I forced down another meal of cold ravioli with tomato sauce and a biscuit. It was almost 5 p.m., and there was only a little over 10 hours remaining until we were set to be picked up by the helicopter.

We left at 11 p.m. Carefully, we collected all the palm leaves around our observation base and shoved them under some bushes to keep them from being found later. We had to be sure to erase all traces of our presence. We checked the base for trash and made sure our shit bags were buried down deep enough. The smallest piece of paper or plastic would reveal that we'd been here and would make a return far riskier. And it was not too remote a possibility that we'd end up back out here again.

As we moved toward the helicopter's landing zone, the silence of the night was ripped apart by automatic weapons fire and tracers in the sky. Small arms fire barked at the sky for a couple of minutes. All this came from no more than a couple of miles to the south. But we stayed calm. We were fairly certain that it didn't have anything to do with Danish or British forces. We knew they weren't operating in that area tonight.

We left the cultivated area quietly and crossed the road into the great open plains. The landing zone was about two miles to the northeast. I kept my cool. But I couldn't help but be frustrated about the past four days. It was a damn shame we hadn't gotten to the rockets or taken out any enemy combatants.

## Chapter Nineteen: Quick reaction force

A few hours before, two rockets exploded with a deafening boom less than 300 feet from our tent. The thick canvas flapped violently with the pressure, but we escaped with only a scare; fortunately, the tent was surrounded by a six-feet-high mesh fence covered in soil and sand.

We had to do something about those goddamn militia attacks. We sat on our beds in our cramped eight-man tent surrounded by lockers, weapon cases, backpacks, and all sorts of hardware, listening to our team leader, Kenneth, as he revealed his plan of attack. This time, we'd be moving on a brick factory in the border area close to Iran, where we suspected JAM stored some of their ammunition and weapons. They'd pick up the rockets there, and then distribute them into smaller caches around Basra where they'd be used to attack our base at Basra Air Station.

Another Jaeger team had been in the area around the brick factory running recon, and now my team and two others would fly out there under cover of the night and destroy the cache. Meanwhile, my team would serve the role of quick reaction force (QRF) for the team observing the brick factory. If they needed immediate help, we could be there within an hour by helicopter.

But instead, we were suddenly tasked with a new case when "the Bicep" entered the tent. Not with his usual cheerful smile, but with a strikingly serious expression.

"Forget about the brick factory. MECINF is in trouble and we must operate as QRF for the battalion. Be ready in 15 minutes. Prepare your gear. I'll be back shortly with more info."

The mechanised infantry company of the Danish battalion had apparently gotten into a fight with JAM, and was now in a tight spot. Our equipment was ready, but for this emergency we packed extra ammunition, more grenades, an additional medical kit, and a couple of backpacks with water, which could help delay the body's dehydration for a few hours in the unbearable desert heat.

Normally, we would never operate in daylight. That was a task for the infantrymen. We Jaeger are men of the dark and always operate in much smaller units than the infantry. But on the other hand, we knew that the situation was particularly bad right now because the battalion was to be released, and was operating with only half its units.

"This is it. Put on your gear. Be ready by the cars in five minutes. A Danish soldier has been shot in the chest, probably by a sniper, and the battalion is under serious pressure by JAM. I will brief you on the way to the helicopter," Bicep yelled through the doorway.

We ran out to the cars and drove to the heli pads. My face was already dripping with sweat from the intense midday sun when we arrived at the site where there seemed to be confusion. We found out how serious the situation was, as an additional 30-40 British soldiers had been called in as

reinforcements. This was not just a normal QRF. All available personnel were scrambled; the unit on the ground must have been in really big trouble.

“Gather here,” Bicep shouted above the noise of the British S-61 helicopter, ready with spinning rotor blades. “Okay, here’s what I know: The group of Danish soldiers, one of whom has been wounded by a sniper, have retreated into a house. They are under heavy fire from JAM. We have tried to rescue them in an armored personnel vehicle, but it ran over an IED, which resulted in six or seven wounded, including at least one seriously injured. They’re now trying to evacuate all the wounded to a LZ close by. We’re going to secure that LZ so they can get treatment at BAS. Questions?”

No questions.

“We have priority on the helicopter. Go!”

I was in the back of the pack running toward the helicopter, since, as team scout, I had to be the first one off. Flying a helicopter in broad daylight over hostile terrain only happened in absolute emergencies. The helicopter was extremely vulnerable to fire from machine guns and smaller weapons from the ground, and I quickly realized this old S-61 didn’t have any armament. Not exactly reassuring. Especially not when we only had a general idea of where we would land and no idea at all what the situation would be once we were there.

So ours was a helicopter filled with uncertainty, rising above the pavement of the landing zone, turning around toward the northeast, and soaring low over the Iraqi desert toward northern Basra. Flight time was 10 minutes, and while the British loadmaster signaled to us that there was one minute to go, the pilots made a few sharp tactical turns to avoid fire from the ground.

It was extra hot down there today.

In the next moment, the helicopter came to a sudden halt and I could see our landing zone—an open space of a few hundred feet to each side, surrounded by green areas with houses scattered here and there.

The wheels of the helicopter touched the ground and the loadmaster gave us the signal, shouting, “Go! Go! Go!”

I jumped out into the rotor blade’s swirl of dust and sand, followed by the rest of my team. I ran toward a narrow earth bank, which was the nearest cover I could see. The helicopter immediately lifted off, returning to BAS to pick up the British soldiers.

There was total confusion in the area. The MECINF’s armored personnel carriers and other lighter vehicles were parked all around the area with their weapons sticking out in all directions and the machine guns were spitting eastward. That was where the infantry group was cut off. There were shouts and screams among the soldiers in and around the vehicles, and I could hear the coms in the

vehicles giving a steady stream of reports about the enemy.

Kenneth communicated with one of the Danish officers, who seemed to be most up-to-date. We had to secure the zone toward the north. We placed ourselves in a semicircle behind some small roots in the ground, which provided the best cover available.

The first enemy grenade hit the ground 100 feet away from us. The hollow bang shook the ground beneath us, and we pressed ourselves down as tightly as possible. Immediately after the first detonation, two more exploded even closer to us, the fragments whisking the air above us. There was little cover between the stranded troops and us. We needed to get away from there.

Hans, our sniper, shouted that we could seek shelter behind one of the armored personnel vehicles. We rolled out of our position, got to our feet, and threw ourselves behind one of the vehicles. Two more grenades detonated, this time even closer. Whoever operated these mortars knew what they were doing!

Judging by the power of detonations, it seemed we were being fired on with 82mm grenades, and it was obvious that JAM had an observer stationed somewhere who could see where the grenades were striking. Wherever he was, he was adjusting their fire to our position. It was just a matter of time before it started to rain mortar rounds all over the LZ. The MECINF company was also well aware of this, because their captain shouted from the top of his lungs that everyone needed to leave the area immediately. Everyone ran to the closest vehicle and jumped aboard, the leaders shouting for their people, checking to ensure everyone was there. I threw myself on the back of a Mercedes Geländewagen four wheel drive jeep, which immediately began driving away—the back filled with infantrymen.

I sat beside a young sergeant who shouted details about the situation into my ear. MECINF had, earlier that morning, been out to provide protection for one of the civilian Danish reconstruction units overseeing an ongoing project at a school. As they were moving through the village on foot, the first Danish soldier was shot in the chest by a sniper. As his group pulled him into a house, they were quickly cut off from the rest of the company. During the attempt to come and rescue them in the armored personnel carrier, seven soldiers had been wounded by a roadside bomb.

They'd managed to evacuate those seven. Now, it was all about getting the wounded soldier and the rest of his group in the house to safety. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like the Danish company was gaining enough momentum to push JAM back long enough for us to evacuate the infantry group.

We were running in a long line of 10-12 vehicles along the road toward the north, onto a desert plain. We kicked up a cloud of sand and dust, clearly showing JAM where we were headed. After just over a mile, we turned right and came to a halt behind some sand banks that had probably been used by

the Iraqi army as battle positions. We parked our vehicles at the edge of the banks and pointed all available weapons towards the open terrain. I ran toward a south-facing embankment, followed by Søren with his H&K 5.56mm machine gun, while the others found similar cover. We were ready to fight off any enemies that dared approach.

At the same time, Frederik and Christian helped to stabilize two of the wounded soldiers that were hit by the roadside bomb—the driver and the gunner. One of them was in shock and the other one was badly burned. Frederik and Christian were both competent medics with plenty of operational experience, and they quickly provided a liquid drip for one of them and some mental assistance for the other.

I noticed Bicep marching around the area like a cock in a henhouse. Despite the seriousness of the situation, he seemed to be in his element. I heard his voice through my earpiece. With help from the Brits, they'd managed to evacuate the infantry from the house to BAS. But they were, unfortunately, too late to save the Danish soldier who'd been hit by the sniper. He died in the house, where he and his group had been cut off.

At the time, it seemed like the situation was out of control. There was no sign of who had the upper hand, even though the company should have swung the advantage by now. Rather, they seemed pressured more and more into the defense. When intelligence informed us that JAM was about to mobilize a force of 400-500 men a few miles south of our position, it was decided that we'd leave the area and evacuate to BAS as soon as possible.

A small reconnaissance team was sent out in a GD to find the best escape route, but they only just passed the embankments when machine gun fire struck the ground in front of them. The driver turned around immediately and drove back at full speed while we provided suppressive fire with all the firepower we had.

Judging from the angle of the shots, they were coming from a small settlement some hundred feet to the south of us. I withdrew my small Zeiss binoculars and scanned every square foot of the walls, windows, doors, and roofs. Nothing.

How frustrating could it get? I was lying there like just another infantryman, in a battle against an enemy that clearly had the upper hand. We had limited chance to strike back. I just wanted to paint the houses in lead alongside Søren and his H&K. If nothing else, it would keep the enemy's heads down. But that was obviously not possible. I couldn't identify any enemy, and we were not allowed to open fire out of pure anger, especially on a settlement where there might be women and children.

One of the company's officers shouted that everyone should prepare to leave the area. JAM was moving quickly in our direction. With an additional 400-500 hostile enemies on top of the current one,

the company would be looking at a very gloomy night. We had to get out of there immediately. A few minutes later, we hightailed out of there under heavy fire, on our way across the golden desert. We hit a broad gravel road and the company came to a halt to observe whether JAM was approaching from the south. Nothing.

Bicep growled over the radio that we couldn't evacuate with the company. We still had our job as a QRF for our team at the brick factory, who had gone without backup since that morning when we were deployed to aid the battalion. We had done all we could here, he said, and he ordered us to get off the vehicles.

A bunch of staring infantrymen saw us getting off and huddled together as their vehicles disappeared down the gravel road. Bicep requested a helicopter, which would arrive any minute. It was one of the privileges of being a Jaeger. If we needed a helicopter, we got first priority.

A short time later, we made contact with the pilot of the helicopter, who announced that he was two minutes out. I kneeled and prepared my smoke grenades. In a clear silhouette against the orange afternoon sun, the British EH-101 transport helicopter appeared. I pulled the pin on one of the smoke grenades, the heavy smoke signaling our position.

When we got back to BAS, we began to clean and ready our weapons and equipment in case we got called in as QRF for the other Jaeger team.

It had been a rough day, particularly because we weren't used to feeling so helpless. We had been trained to maximize our aggression when cornered, and we had certainly not lived up to that today. We had been on our heels against an enemy who clearly controlled the fight on the battlefield. And that made me angry. We ran away like dogs with the tail between our legs!

Mostly though, the day had been tough because the 20-year-old private had died, and another of our soldiers, Private First Class Hansen, had lost his leg.

A few days before, I had been chatting in front of our tent with PFC Hansen, whom I had noticed would go on daily runs despite the sweltering heat. A happy and friendly guy, he told me that he wanted to be a Jaeger. And he still wanted that, he said through a fog of morphine while being treated at the British field hospital on base. He had not yet realized that he had lost his leg above the knee. A little bit later though, when the fog lifted and he got a little clearer, he came to grips with the reality of the situation. He confided in my buddy, John, that he now wanted to train for participation in the Paralympics.

## Chapter Twenty: The highest honor

Task Force K-Bar and the Jaegers were getting a huge deal of recognition for their actions in Afghanistan. To have boots on the ground who were capable of constantly monitoring the enemy's movements was really deemed impressive and invaluable by the Americans leading the coalition forces.

In the years before Afghanistan, the world's most authoritative superpowers used to rely primarily on a technology-based war machine. But no matter how many technological wonders the military system had at its disposal, there were still boots on the ground, Special Forces and infantrymen, who provided better intel about the enemy than any machine could. Accurate and valid information was and always will be imperative for identifying and engaging the right targets. The Americans knew this and recognized the great value of our efforts.

But I was still somewhat surprised when, three years after my return from Afghanistan, I was standing in a conference room at the Jaeger Corps barracks at Aalborg Air Base, and my eyes caught a picture on the wall of our former commander, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Lissner. In the picture, he was shaking hands with U.S. President George W. Bush. The picture was dated December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004, and bore an inscription that apparently had something to do with an award for Task Force K-Bar—the Presidential Unit Citation Award.

It puzzled me. A search online revealed what the award stood for:

*“The Presidential Unit Citation is awarded to units of the Armed Forces of the United States and co-belligerent nation for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy occurring on or after 7 December, 1941. The unit must display such gallantry, determination, and esprit de corps in accomplishing its mission under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions as to set it apart and above other units participating in the same campaign.”*

I was speechless when it dawned on me that, without even knowing, we'd been honored with the highest U.S. military unit award a foreign military unit such as ours could receive. We were in the company of, amongst others, units from D-Day, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, and no other army units had received this award since the Vietnam war ended in 1975.

I've never much been into medals, awards, or fancy uniforms. But this one made me proud, because I, as a Special Forces operator from a tiny military nation, had been part of a unit that contributed to our nation's war effort to an exceptional degree. But the fact that such a prestigious

award had been given to us without our countrymen knowing about it made me furious. Here, we'd risked our lives thousands of miles from home, deep in the enemy's backyard, surrounded by Taliban and al-Qaida, and our military commanders had the gall and incredible arrogance to not even bother telling us about this honor. Not even so much as a tiny note in our internal magazine *Jægernyt*—*Jaeger News*.

I was disappointed and angry, and approached our new commander about it. Fortunately, he agreed with me. Finally, a year later, we were at a parade in the Corps' courtyard where we received a ribbon and were highly praised by the U.S. embassy's military attaché, Lieutenant Colonel Mike Schleicher, who kept emphasizing the rarity of the award. Even he seemed surprised to not have been invited to this event sooner.

I really felt like we deserved this honor. Our effort was historic, because it was the first and only time that the Jaeger Corps had been deployed as part of a combined task force. And we'd been useful. We gathered intel about the enemy, which was later used for operations against the Taliban and al-Qaida. We conducted direct action and sensitive site exploitations missions, and blew up the enemy's ammunition to keep it from ending up in the heads of our friends and allies.

My outrage about my commanders' complete lack of leadership when it came to appreciating these unique performances only grew when I later learned that the Americans—again, without any official recognition—had given the Army Commendation Medal to a Jaeger team leader, JT, for unusual leadership under extremely difficult conditions. For 14 days, JT and his team observed from a ledge so narrow, only a few people in the team could actually lie down. In the cover of darkness, they climbed down the cliff and crept into a nearby village, where they were as close as an arm's length from the armed al-Qaida terrorists and still managed to gather intel about the enemy.

The U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumfeld, was supposed to hand over the medal personally. But when his plane couldn't land in Kabul due to bad weather, JT instead received the medal by the deputy director for Special Operations in Afghanistan, U.S. Colonel Mark V. Phelan.

In August, 2008, it was time for me to step down from my position as a Jaeger operative. As a 41-year-old, I was in my operational fall. Physically, I knew I could still keep up with my fellow Jaegers for many years, but I was approaching a future senior career in the Jaeger Corps sitting behind a desk—days marked by casework, the sluggish workflow of bureaucracy, and endless trips to the coffee machine.

It was a future I was too restless for. Since I also wanted to try another career in a completely different field, I chose to quit.



On a sunny—and for Aalborg Air Base, very calm—summer day, I cleared out my locker, handed over my weapons, put a couple of cases of beer and some bags of snacks in the squadron's briefing room, and then drove out of the main gate with Selma in the passenger's seat, heading toward Copenhagen.

No speeches, no diplomas, no comments or questions, no pats on the back after 11 years of operational service in the world's most dangerous warzones. And it suited me just fine. I didn't enjoy being the center of attention.

My heyday will always be the years I spent in the Jaeger teams. Of everything I've been involved with in my past, and whatever I'm going to encounter in the future, the time when I was part of this small, exclusive band of brothers will forever be my best. Nothing could compare to the unpredictability, the intensity, and the fraternity of being a part of such a community made up of first-class soldiers with shared values and goals. To have fought through the same painful hardships during the training process, to fall through the skies on a dark and cold night together with my team, to be isolated with them for days on a mountain ledge in Afghanistan, to struggle through the sewers of Iraq with them, it all created a bond and a feeling of connectivity beyond words. In a world where many people struggle through a life of solitude, this is a precious privilege.

And on a personal level, nothing could compare to moving through unfamiliar frontier zones where one could ultimately die. It was probably a kind of mild masochism. But really getting out there, where I felt like I was truly living, that was unique. I believe it's a hardly explicable—and certainly even harder to understand—need to constantly push one's boundaries. I fully met my needs in the Jaeger Corps.

Now, I'll look forward, finding new dreams to pursue. I am far from done with adventure and excitement. I want to taste so much more of life's possibilities; I just don't have a clear goal for the rest of my life yet. I might further educate myself in the military system. Or perhaps I'll stick to the civilian world. I want to travel, perhaps once more as a photographer, grabbing the camera to create a book of photography from the world's most dangerous places.

My time as a Jaeger has given me physical and mental resources that will hopefully make life a little easier for me. Obviously, I can't walk on water, even though I believed so when I trained to become a Jaeger. But I've realized that, when I have a dream with real substance and try to live that dream, the illusions and the joys of expectation are enough to make me feel like I could actually walk on water.

If I hadn't been a restless soul already, I would have certainly become one in the Jaeger Corps.

I'm always pursuing new challenges. Naturally, I jumped at the opportunity when I learned that the Corps was deploying 65 Jaegers to Afghanistan in May, 2009. I immediately called Bicep and reported for service once again, knowing full well that it could be my last chance to don the uniform. But the team was already filled up, and the C-130 left a few days later.

Without me.

## Afterword: The Jaeger case

The following chapter should not be seen as a plea of any kind, because I have nothing to defend. Regardless of whether the Danish military command, the Ministry of Defense, politicians, or anyone else who might think that my book endangers the lives of Danish soldiers or is a threat against “the security of the state and the armed forces of the kingdom,” the military’s own judicial experts, the military’s legal investigation unit, came to the conclusion that this work is perfectly harmless to operational security after more than a year-long inquiry.

If one has even a small bit of insight into the world of Special Forces, one would also know that nothing I’ve written in this book can’t also be found using public and open sources. To believe that the book is harmful to Denmark and its soldiers is also naïve. If anything, this book works to counteract the worrying lack of knowledge about the enemy that Denmark has been fighting against in Afghanistan.

Taliban and al-Qaida are far more sophisticated than the general Danish public realizes, and the same naivety applies to certain parts of the Danish military command and the Ministry of Defense. Taliban and al-Qaida commanders are intelligent opponents who were certainly well aware of Danish and coalition forces’ behavioral patterns.

The average Danish citizen can’t be blamed for not knowing this; it’s not their job. But it is definitely the military command’s responsibility, and also the politicians’ business to know the enemy that Danish soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan.

That’s why the controversial events surrounding *Jaeger: At War with the Elite* had me worried. Not because I was worried about myself or about the consequences that the case might have for me—those I stopped worrying about a long time ago. I was concerned because the Danish men and women who put their lives in danger every day in Afghanistan’s Helmand province deserved to be sent into war by competent and resourceful leadership that had its priorities where it counts: on the battlefield. That is where the enemy is and that is where the battle is fought.

*Jaeger: At War with the Elite* is a collection of memories that I have compiled because I’m a dedicated soldier, for whom the Jaeger Corps is and has been the ultimate accomplishment. I’ve mentioned it before in this book, and taking the risk of sounding brassy, the 11 years I spent in the Corps will always be the highlight of my life. Nothing has ever, and nothing will ever, come close to those experiences, the brotherhood, and the way of life that I learned in those 11 years.

Especially because my affection for the Corps is so strong, it was of the utmost importance for me to write a book that in no way bothers, harms, or increases the risk to the safety of my comrades in the teams or for other Danish or coalition soldiers. I had hoped that the book could be used as a positive

reinforcement in the military's mission to recruit young people that want to represent Denmark in a uniform. And I know that it has worked in that way and excited many of those whom the military wants to reach. Since the book has been released, I have received several thousand messages on my website and my Facebook profile from young people, not only in Denmark, but also in Sweden and Norway. They have confided in me that they want to become Jaegers, simply because my book has inspired them. Many of them have asked further questions about how I reached my goal of becoming a Jaeger. I have given these young and interested people the best advice I could, and have also developed training programs and published them on my website for their use. It makes me happy and proud that my book has had such a profound impact on many young people.

And even if the political aftermath is not what these young readers associate with my story, the events surrounding its publication still manifested themselves in the nation's memory as the "Jaeger case." When it exploded in September 2009, it quickly reached a level of hysteria, and I chose not to comment on it publicly at the time.

You have to pick your battles carefully, and sometimes it is wiser to simply shut up.

This additional chapter to the original version of the book is an attempt to describe a 14-month-long period of my life I spent in self-elected silence.

Frankly, it was like spending more than a year in a new form of war.

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The alarm on my mobile phone woke me up at 6:30 a.m. on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009. I reached for it on the nightstand and turned off the annoying church-bell tone that I still hadn't gotten around to changing. As part of my morning ritual, I put my hand on the TV remote and pressed the number eight button, turning on TV 2 News. I squinted and could barely make out the yellow "Breaking News" banner at the bottom of the screen. Then, the picture changed and I was suddenly wide awake.

The cover of my book filled the entire screen, and the host of the show led with this sentence: "Former Jaeger soldier Thomas Rath sack's upcoming book, *Jaeger: At War with the Elite...*" I sat bolt upright in the bed and turned up the volume. The piece continued with an "expert" I'd never heard of who commented about the book, alleging that it seemed to contain many delicate operational secrets and exposed many highly sensitive and revealing facts about the Jaeger Corps' operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. I reached for my phone once again, which I always kept on silent when I slept. There were 46 missed calls and 27 text messages from the major Danish journalism networks, primarily from TV2 and Danish National Broadcasting Company.

This sudden massive media interest was caused by the article “Danish elite soldiers operate in secrecy,” published by the newspaper *Jyllands-posten*. It mainly covered my favorite chapter in this book: chapter 14, “Undercover,” which describes one of my team’s missions that required us to disguise ourselves as Afghans and meet with a secret agent.

I’m not a morning person, and it usually takes me a while to wake up, but I knew this was going to be a very hectic day. I quickly got out of bed. I said “good morning” to Selma, took a quick shower, got dressed, and ate a bowl of cereal with apple and banana while Selma munched her dry food with a little bit of liver pâté and some steamed vegetables.

I locked the door to my apartment at 7:30, and with a notebook, pen, and spare battery for my phone in my pocket, Selma and I set out towards our usual morning route in the park. My cellphone was burning up, and it felt like the entire Danish Press Corps was trying to get ahold of me. But a little red light was blinking before my inner eye, and I chose to ignore their calls.

My book was set to be released in a couple of weeks. It was getting printed at that very moment, and I had the same feeling that I had as a boy the night before Christmas—the glee of anticipation. I couldn’t wait to hold the freshly printed book in my hands and finally physically feel the result of a year of working madness. Next to doing my job in the army, I’d spent every possible hour, nights, weekends, days off, vacations, and even New Year’s Eve writing and working with my collaborator on the book. And in all modesty, I had to say that I was pretty pleased with the final result.

I’d taken that week off to give a couple of interviews to the major daily newspapers that wanted to publish articles about my book.

The newspaper *B.T.* was set to read it first, but they declined since they thought it wasn’t really anything worth writing about, even though this was the first book written by a war-experienced operative Jaeger and amongst other topics, covered the war we were still fighting in Afghanistan. TV2’s “Godmorgen Danmark” (Good Morning Denmark) had shown a similar lack of interest and said that they “might” want me in the studio around the date of the book’s release. There was no lack of interest, now. Overnight, my book had become the media’s hottest news, and I could probably choose between each and every one of the newspapers, radio stations, and TV networks in the entire country to pitch my work.

The situation escalated quickly, though. On the radio, the political opposition demanded an explanation about the details of the mentioned missions in my book, and the military command accused me of endangering the nation itself and its relations with other foreign powers. It was already a political scandal and quite frankly out of my hands. Decisions had to be made, and since I was completely inexperienced with this sort of matter, I choose to not comment, since I would only risk harming

myself by doing so.

I really didn't feel comfortable in this situation, and I knew that I couldn't counter the pressure that would inevitably grow in the following hours, days, weeks, and maybe months, on my own. I needed a competent advisor, and there was one person who I immediately thought to contact. He was a wise gentleman, one whom I had been so lucky to be introduced to six months prior. His initials were MN—and for his privacy, that's what I will refer to him as from here on out. He turned out to be a colossal moral support during the entire span of the case, and without his help, my situation would have been a whole lot more arduous.

I called him that morning from the park, but chose my words very carefully. If the military command and the Ministry of Defense believed that I was a threat to the security of the nation, it was likely that they were already tapping my phone calls. Not that I had anything to hide, but certain issues should remain in privacy, without the secret intelligence service's SIGINT section on the other line.

"Just shut the hell up, Thomas!" MN said, which confirmed my intuition about keeping a low profile. He promptly set me up with a talented lawyer with whom I got in contact with shortly thereafter. I explained the situation to him, and we decided on a plan of action for the following days. At my publisher's, things were going crazy. The creative director seemed slightly groggy regarding the media shitstorm that was currently brewing over the agency. He told me that he had been on the phone with both the military command and the Ministry of Defense, and that two representatives from the military command, a lieutenant colonel from the Department of Communications and their lawyer, had announced their visit that same afternoon. In addition to that, the publishing house had been called in to a meeting at military command headquarters in a couple of days.

I called my family, who were stunned by the new spotlight I'd found myself in. They were pretty calm about the whole situation, which they always seemed to be when it really counted, and they offered their help with any practical things. I declined respectfully.

A few Jaegers called and ask me laughingly, "What the fuck is going on?"

They'd known about the book right from the start, and many of them had already read the manuscript. I explained to them about the day's events, and they were seemingly just as surprised as I was by the extreme reaction of their employer.

I told them that I just didn't know what had hit me, but that it was probably just "a storm in a teacup." As usual, they were pretty relaxed, and we exchanged some small talk about wives and girlfriends and about how it was going in the Corps. They had been on the shooting range all day and had tested some new Heckler & Koch grenade launchers. I instantly missed that simple and carefree way of life.

That afternoon, I returned once more to the park with Selma. On the drive back to my apartment, I turned onto my street and noticed a big white van with a satellite dish on its roof. It was from TV2 News, who had sent a team of reporters to find me. They were filming up toward my apartment on the second floor.

Dammit!

Under no circumstances was I willing to comment on the situation, and I didn't feel like having them running around my ankles all the way up to my front door. I managed to turn a few hundred feet before the reporters and took a shortcut around the property, parking in the back. Selma and I entered the building through the back door and reached my apartment via the basement. I locked the door behind me, and through the window I caught a glimpse of the reporters, still enthusiastically filming the seemingly empty apartment. After waiting for about an hour, they packed up and left.

During that mild September evening, there were many knocks on my door. They came primarily from journalists who wanted to know if I would be willing to comment on the situation. I calmly replied that I didn't wish to do so, and they apologized for the disturbance and left.

I was pretty exhausted from the day's pressure; it was very different from what I was used to as a soldier. I was trained to operate in a team, where all decisions were based on what was best for the fellowship and not what was best for the individual. We were trained to be in control and to take initiative. As part of the Corps, and on missions with my brothers, I felt almost invincible. But I had to fight this battle on my own, in an unpredictable gray area, where the conditions for the battle were completely new and unknown to me. I sat down in front of my computer and tried to gather my thoughts while forming some sort of plan for the coming days.

On the second day, September 11<sup>th</sup>, I had a number of meetings, amongst others, at my publishing house. There, I bumped into a team of reporters waiting for me at the receptionist's desk, who of course threw themselves at me. I told them that I still didn't wish to comment on the matter. At the first meeting, I went over the matter with the executives and a few lawyers who were later going to the meeting with military command. I also had a meeting with my trade union (yes, the Danish Army does in fact have this!), the Central Association for Permanent Defense Personnel, who declared their support.

At my place of work, the Territorial Army, Copenhagen, my boss, a colonel, went over the situation with me in great detail. He seemed genuinely interested in helping me, and continuously scribbled down notes about the whole process of the book's creation. He said doing so would help him prepare for the inquiries from his bosses that would start to flood in soon enough. He was a man of

action, and contacted the army's human resources department straightaway. They informed him that I was suspended from service until further notice and that my security clearance was to be revoked. This meant that I wasn't allowed to work, so the colonel had no choice but to give me some time off.

So I was sent home like some kind of schoolboy who had misbehaved.

I met MN at our usual meeting place. We discussed various possibilities and scenarios, and I intently listened to his input and advice.

"Don't say anything," he kept advising me, and he told me what he was intending to do in the following days in relation to my case.

As always, I bid him farewell feeling calm and optimistic.

In the car on the way home, I got another call from one of the guys in the Corps. He was at the shooting range once again, and was laughing, together with the rest of the team, at the national radio program "The Loose Cannon," which I could hear booming from the speakers of their Toyota Land Cruiser in the background. The radio hosts were apparently having a laugh about the situation that was unfolding in the national media.

"Ok, gonna blast off some 203s. Later, dude," my Jaeger comrade said, ending the conversation. He'd been referring to a M-203 grenade launcher and its 40mm grenades.

My publisher's meeting with military command the previous day didn't go anywhere. So on Monday, the 14<sup>th</sup> of September, the military command wrote the nation's editors-in-chief and appealed to them to not publish any details or information from my book. Additionally, they asked for an injunction against my work, which raised heavy debate in the media. There was now talk of censorship of the press and freedom of speech violations. One particular newspaper—*Politiken*—was enraged.

"We are not going to honor the army's request," the editor-in-chief declared.

The injunction case was to begin on Thursday the 17<sup>th</sup> of September. If it were to go through, it would be historic in that no other cases like it had been seen before in Danish court history. The thought alone angered me deeply, and I was even more ready to fight for the right to publish my book.

On the day before the case was set to begin, the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, things took a spectacular turn. *Politiken* printed my book in an extra large issue with 124,000 copies, and it was sold out within a couple of hours. The editor-in-chief explained their actions with the following words: "We did it to secure and underline the public's right to know what's going on, even when we're at war and when it doesn't work for the authorities."

The nation was split. Either the newspaper was glorified for defending freedom of speech, or



they were attacked for having used the situation for a promotional media stunt. I was obviously very irritated by *Politiken*'s action and the possible consequences, but I let my publishing house handle the dialogue with them.

When the injunction case began the next day, I had to force myself through the crowd of reporters on the way to court in central Copenhagen, where I was to take the stand as a witness. The case stretched on for days as the judges decided to take the weekend to deliberate on a decision.

Monday, September the 21<sup>st</sup>, was the day of the decision. I was sitting in a café in the late morning, drinking a Coke while following the media's coverage of the case on my phone.

Suddenly, I received a text message from my publisher. "Incredible!" it said. The judge had declined the injunction. She came to the decision that it didn't make sense to go through with it, especially after *Politiken*'s piece.

I was allowed to publish my book.

The next morning, I was in the park with Selma when my phone rang.

"Hi Thomas, it's a great book you've written. But I have to inform you that you're been charged by regular criminal law #152 for a breach of confidentiality, and also by the military's criminal law #31 for revealing military secrets."

The person on the other end of the line was an auditor in the military's legal investigation unit and added that I should expect to be called in "for a meeting." Well aware that the nice man was just doing his job, I replied that this phone call was surely not an everyday occurrence, and asked him when I was expected to come in for that meeting. It would be at least a couple of weeks.

Well, I thought, I can add that to my list of accolades. Now I'd been charged with crimes that carried a possibility of up to eight years in prison, or maybe even 12 if there were allegations of a violation "of a flagrant nature."

This I'd need to wash down with a couple of beers in my apartment that night.

Despite the persecution from the military command and the Ministry of Defense, I got back into a mental rhythm after a couple of weeks. I came to realize that I had no influence on the outcome of the case, and that gave me a sort of inner peace. I also used my experience as Jaeger to put things into perspective; once in a while you just need to stop and take a couple of deep breaths.

I made sure I tended to my basic needs: I ate healthy, I exercised daily, and I tried to get a sufficient amount of sleep every night. It was especially important at such a time to avoid wallowing in self-pity or becoming indolent. That can quickly sneak up on you and affect your mental health.

People around me asked if I was nervous, worried, or angry to be portrayed as some kind of

traitor to the nation. I answered that I was taking it calmly because I knew without question that I was no traitor. Quite the opposite. I served my country as a soldier for 16 years, during which time I spent two years on missions in war zones, and I'd written a book that portrayed my former unit, my colleagues and my comrades, in the most positive way—a book that I haven't regretted writing for a second.

By September 24<sup>th</sup>, two weeks had passed since all hell broke loose. I was sitting in my car listening to the radio when I heard an announcement: “The book *Jaeger: At War with the Elite* is now available in Arabic.”

At first I didn't see why this was news. Denmark's military engagement was in Afghanistan, and more than 40% of the Afghan population are Pashto and don't speak a word of Arabic. The announcement also felt a bit theatrical, as if the news was proclaiming that this Arabic translation would suddenly make it more dangerous to be a Danish soldier in Afghanistan. Honestly, the Taliban and al-Qaida wouldn't know one bit more about the operational patterns of Danish soldiers even if they did read my book. I didn't think it would provoke any kind of reaction amongst the Taliban or al-Qaida, except maybe their disgust for an infidel Western dog-lover.

A few minutes later on the radio news, the story about the Arabic translation was the top story. The minister of defense came on and said that the translation had already been uploaded to the Internet, which, he claimed, underlined the dangerous nature of my book.

The show had begun.

A few minutes later, the Arabic version was on one of the larger newspapers' homepage, but was taken down after only an hour. The official report stated that the version was a faulty machine translation, riddled with mistakes.

A few brainy journalists researched the situation, and it seemed that the Word document had been translated by a program similar to Google Translate before being leaked by a person in military command. Military command insisted that the translation was not an inside job, and that the document was found on an international file-sharing site.

In the following days, the case of the Arabic translation developed into a national, and partially even international, spectacle, with me involuntarily playing the lead role.

I was deeply astonished by the military command's and the Ministry of Defense's methods. But mostly, I was just annoyed. After 16 years in the army, I knew that the organization employed many competent and loyal men and women. And those good people, representatives of the armed forces like those who brought on this litigious quagmire, would now have to bear the embarrassment brought on

by the actions of their peers.

I mostly thought of the servicemen and women who, day in and day out, risk their lives in the Helmand province. They didn't deserve to be the victims of the military's crumbling reputation. I thought about my brothers in the Corps, too, but not to the same degree. I knew they wouldn't let these kinds of scandals in the minister's offices get to them. They probably couldn't care less, as long as they were allowed to do their job in peace.

I visited my parents a couple of days later, and we watched a Saturday evening talk show. The minister of defense, Søren Gade, was on as a guest, and he was asked for whom there would be consequences if it turned out that the translations were actually fabricated by someone in the military command. He answered with the words that have since become quite famous: "This daddy right here, since I am the boss of the whole thing."

The pressure on the military and the Ministry of Defense was heightened in the following week, and on October 1<sup>st</sup>, it was revealed that the head of the military command's IT department was responsible for making the translation. He was suspended and the military's legal investigation unit opened up a case against him.

On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Defense Command's head of communications admitted that he sent the Arabic translations to the newspaper *B.T.*, and he was resultantly suspended as well. Two days later, the head of the armed forces, an admiral, announced that he was stepping down due to the turbulence surrounding the translation scandal. Shortly thereafter, the minister of defense, Mr. "This daddy right here," openly stated that he had no intention of resigning.

October 2<sup>nd</sup> was also the day that my book was released. In the first four weeks alone, it sold more than 30,000 copies, elevating it number one bestseller status in Denmark. Three weeks earlier, I would have been lucky if it had sold 10,000 copies in its entire lifespan. After a year, it reached 100,000 copies thanks to sales in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Bulgaria. By 2014, it had sold more than 250,000 copies.

This was really big, and very vindicating to know that my fight for the book had led to me standing behind the bestseller of the year. As the reviews came in, I noticed, with a sense of great pride, that most called it "a necessary book." At the end of the year, it was considered number 12 of 20 of the year's best publications.

Despite the great sales, it was something of a paradox to think that it would have done even better if there had been an injunction to not publish it, since the U.S., United Kingdom, Germany, and Holland were ready to print "the forbidden book."

The case surrounding my book was recognized in all the countries above, and was even spoken about on the other side of the planet in New Zealand. This was probably because they've had a similar case with SAS operative Mike Coburn, who in 2004 published *Soldier Five*, which both the New Zealand and U.K. governments tried to slow down. His book reflected a critical outlook on the leadership of the SAS in association with a mission that had gone wrong: Three elite soldiers had been killed and four held hostage. The event had earlier been described by Coburn's teammates Andy McNab in his book, *Bravo Two Zero*, and Chris Ryan in *The One That Got Away*, but their books had apparently been approved and corrected by the British Ministry of Defense prior to going to print.

I began preparing myself for my questioning with the military's legal investigation unit. I still didn't know when they wanted to question me, how long it would take, what they wanted to interrogate me about, or how they would go about it.

The word "interrogation" had a scary ring to it for me as a soldier, and I remembered my experiences as a Jaeger during a survival course with the British SAS where I had been beaten while underneath a bright spotlight, threatened, and yelled at. I was quite confident that the folks from the legal unit would be more civilized and would have more civil methods.

While writing this book, I collected a lot of open-source material—publicly accessible on the Internet—to assure myself that I was not revealing any secrets or information about the military that wasn't already available for public access. In addition to that, I collected information from books, magazines, and films that supported my case, and filed them systematically in a binder.

The whole case, which was now commonly referred to as the "Jaeger case," and its Kafkaesque proportions befuddled me. When I compared the information from my book to what I found on the Internet and already-published books and magazines, my book seemed as harmless as a Boy Scout handbook.

So why had it come so far? Was all this an attempt to control books and publications published by military personnel? Or was it just a knee-jerk reaction from the military command or the Ministry of Defense? Was it a collision between a younger, operational culture and a more outdated, conservative, Cold war culture amongst the military's commanders? Or was it a bit of everything?

I don't know, and I will probably never find out.

Months later, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December at 8:55 a.m., I had my questioning at the military's legal investigation unit. I heaved my suitcase out of the trunk of my car and pulled it across the icy and uneven cobblestone in front of the building. The suitcase was filled with my 'ammunition' for the day: all the open-source material that would prove I hadn't revealed any military secrets. I was armed with

the truth and had nothing to hide.

I was questioned with my lawyer right next to me, and the memories of the harsh spotlight in my face and the bad breath of the British officer almost 20 years earlier quickly escaped my mind. The same legal advisor who had called me months prior when I was in the park with Selma greeted us with coffee and fruit. The whole process took place in a relaxed atmosphere in the basement of the auditor unit's office complex. The guy asked me a number of questions about relationships and passages the military command had considered problematic in my book.

The questioning didn't get to me. I was well prepared and I argued why my book wasn't harmful for the security of the nation or for Danish soldiers. The legal advisor typed my answers into his computer. The questioning continued for three days, or approximately 20 hours. Then, I was done with the only official contact I'd had with the military in months. My lawyer and I were both pretty pleased with my work.

The legal investigation unit would have its verdict sometime between February and March of 2010, they said. Despite not hearing from the military for many months, I felt pretty lucky in the beginning of the new year. Not only was I on vacation in Thailand and Kenya, but I was also offered another book deal.

For a couple of months, I worked on an outline for a new book. It's a novel, and it obviously takes place in the world that I know something about: the special operations forces world. It's about a Jaeger in Afghanistan who is on a mission that goes horribly wrong.

I buried myself in writing and almost forgot that I was still on the hook for charges that could put me behind bars for up to 12 years. The uncertainty of not knowing the outcome didn't bother me, though. It was enough for me to see the minister of defense officially step down in February because he felt politically weakened by events including "the Jaeger case."

The press let me be at that point. They realized a long time before that I wouldn't comment on the situation under any circumstances, so I actually had some peace and quiet to write. I never really felt like I was bothered in my day-to-day life. The few times that people would actually address me, it was with positive remarks and it in no way bothered me.

There was still no sign of when my case was going to be closed, even as summer ended and fall arrived. My lawyer and MN kept me constantly updated, but other than that, I was left almost entirely to my own devices. There was plenty to do with the writing of my new novel to keep me occupied. I spent almost the entire summer researching the Pashtunwali, a code of honor that the majority of the Afghan population, the Pashtun people, abide by.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, I woke up at 10:30 a.m. with a heavy head from having consumed the

better part of a bottle of red wine the night before. I slowly swung my legs over the side of the bed in my parents' summerhouse, where I'd entered into a solitary writing camp and had just celebrated the completion of another chapter for my new novel.

As always, my phone had been on silent mode. The display showed a couple of missed calls and text messages. The first message had been sent around 7 a.m. and read: "Hey Thomas, please call me immediately. Best, HJ."

The initials were from a guy who worked in the military's legal investigation unit and had questioned me almost 10 months earlier.

Finally.

I had been suspended for 13 months. I had involuntarily been the star of a very scandalous case that led to a great tumult in the Danish military and the resignation of the head of the armed forces and the minister of defense. And now, I was standing here in my underpants, calling the guy who was going to tell me what the hell was going to happen.

"We have chosen to drop the charges against you. Congratulations," he said in a fresh and upbeat voice.

I was happy, but also not particularly surprised. During the entire ordeal, I had been convinced that my book was not dangerous and hadn't endangered the safety of the nation.

The legal investigation unit sent out a press release wherein their commander stated it wasn't possible to lift the burden of proof, which was necessary for conviction in a criminal case, and they were dropping the charges. He added that chapter 14, "Undercover," however, was a breach of both military criminal law as well as regular criminal law #152 regarding divulging confidential information. But again, he concluded that they didn't have sufficient proof to convict.

I was confused. Originally, the military command had said that the entire book was dangerous. Then, it was only single passages. And now, after 13 months of investigation, it was only chapter 14 they found problematic. And still, it wasn't so problematic that they could actually bring a case against me. I am not a lawyer, but I know that Danish law is based on the fundamental belief that one is innocent until proven guilty. So I came to the conclusion that the legal unit commander, despite his ambiguous message, had confirmed that I hadn't done anything wrong.

I packed up my things and left the summerhouse with Selma. A new and very different phase of my life was about to begin. My self-inflicted vow of silence toward the media was now over. I had thoroughly prepared myself for this day and had developed a strategy for the following days in the media pool. I called my family, MN, my brothers in the Corps, and a number of journalists who had followed "the Jaeger Case." A few hours later, there had already been arrangements made for

interviews with the bigger newspapers and TV networks.

A month after the charges had been dropped, I was still waiting on a statement from the military leaders. Was I going back into service or not? After the charges were dropped, it would only be logical to allow me back in the service, which I had said the entire time that I wanted to do.

Fourteen months of rain shouldn't ruin 16 great years of sunshine.

I received a text message on Monday, the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November that would put the final seal on my destiny.

"Hey Thomas, please call me. Best, ML." I immediately called him back. He informed me that I could come back to work on the following Monday, and he ended our conversation with "welcome back."

I was ecstatic. Finally, I could put my uniform back on. And the only way I can describe how I felt is that I was home again.

But that same afternoon, a crack appeared in my newfound glory. I was contacted by a journalist from the newspaper *Politiken* who asked me whether I was aware of the military's human resource department's intention to give me a disciplinary punishment. I was surprised to say the least. The HR employee didn't mention this over the phone. Later, different sources from the military let me know that they were actually thinking of giving me a disciplinary punishment, but that a full termination was out of the question.

They also wanted to give me a "warning." That doesn't sound very serious, I thought to myself, and imagined a friendly talk on a rug in front of a general or colonel. But when I officially received the warning, it seemed to be a lot more serious than I had initially thought. Together with my lawyer, I sent a rebuttal to the HR department in the hopes that they would retract their warning.

That last uncertainty didn't spoil my happiness at getting back to work at the barracks in central Copenhagen—only about 500 feet from where I had been questioned almost a year earlier.

I had Selma with me as always, and she immediately found her old spot in her basket in my old office. I pulled my uniform out of the closet and brought a box of Danishes and coffee to my coworkers in the small cafeteria. Many of them I hadn't seen in over a year, so we chatted about this and that, and about the challenges the military will have to face in the coming years.

I was back where I belonged.

When I got home from work on Friday, December 17<sup>th</sup>, there was a letter from the military's human resource department. The verdict of the warning was a five-page-long piece which based itself on the so-called "decorum requirement," which basically meant that the military didn't believe I'd fulfilled my job as a sergeant first class with "regard and faith," and that I was guilty of breaching my

vow of confidentiality. That was why they were awarding me a disciplinary punishment in the form of a written warning. All this, despite the fact that the military's legal investigation unit had dropped all charges and not found me guilty.

Some would call it petty and childish behavior of the military's leadership. Others would question who it was that had not acted with "regard and faith" during the previous 14 months—the military or me?

During my evening walk with Selma, I thought things over. I was happy to be back at my job in the service, and I wanted to continue to contribute with my knowledge and 16 years of military experience. But I wanted to contribute under the right circumstances, and not with a disciplinary punishment attached to my name. If I chose to stay with the military, the punishment could harm my career possibilities during the next 17 years until I reach my retirement age. That was simply too much time at a job where the commanders don't find me worthy of their trust. Furthermore, as a Jaeger I'd learned to trust my gut. And my gut said that it was time for me to step down. So I made the difficult, but only right decision there was. I am a soldier with all my heart, and I know that I feel best when I'm wearing the Danish military uniform, but life in the military has to go on without me.

Without me.



## **The Jaeger Corps at war—a timeline**

1995

A team from the Jaeger Corps are sent to Bosnia to conduct counter-sniper operations in the area around the headquarters of the UN Protection Forces in Sarajevo. It is the first time since the Corps was founded in 1961 that the Jaegers are deployed into a war zone.

1999

A team of Jaegers is sent to Kosovo in order to conduct force-protection missions where NATO's bases are being established.

2002

Task Force Ferret, comprised of 102 soldiers from the Jaeger Corps and the Frogman Corps, are deployed to Afghanistan to support the three-month-old, American-led "Operation Enduring Freedom." The objective is to capture the ones responsible for the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, against the World Trade Center building in New York and the Pentagon, as well as to shut down al-Qaida terrorist training camps and depose the Taliban regime. It is the first and only time the Jaeger Corps has been deployed as a task group.

2003

Denmark sends troops to "Operation Iraqi Freedom," led by the Americans. The Jaeger Corps conducts reconnaissance missions and sensitive site-exploitations missions in the area around Basra, in southern Iraq. During the next four years, the Jaeger soldiers conduct close-protection missions for Danish ambassadors and VIP's in Bagdad and in Basra.

2005

A team of Jaegers assists a Danish battalion in Kosovo, where the Serbs and Albanians fight. The Jaegers conduct direct-action missions on high-value targets, including a local militia leader.

2006

Snipers of the Jaeger Corps support besieged Danish and British soldiers in Musa Qala in Afghanistan's Helmand province. One Jaeger WIA.

2007

The Jaegers hunt down insurgents and militia that are launching rockets into Camp Einherjer, close to Basra.

2009

The Jaeger Corps deploys a task group of approximately 65 soldiers to the Helmand province in Afghanistan to kill and capture Taliban and al-Qaida insurgents.

2010-13

Teams of Jaegers are regularly deployed to an American special operations task force (Logar province) as well as a Danish task force in Helmand province, Afghanistan. One Jaeger WIA and one KIA.

(The Jaeger case)

September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009

*Jyllands-Posten* (a major Danish newspaper) prints a story covering the political opposition demanding an explanation about the information in Thomas Rathsack's up-and-coming book *Jaeger: At War with the Elite*. At the same time, the Ministry of Defense accuses the author of endangering both Denmark itself and its relationship with foreign nations.

September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009

Admiral Tim Sloth Jørgensen, the head of the armed forces, writes to the country's editors-in-chief and requests they not print any information from the book. The military also demands an injunction.

September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009

*Politiken* (a renowned Danish newspaper) prints a special add-on of *Jaeger: At War with the Elite* in an extra large edition. They move 124,000 copies, claiming they did so because they believe the book had raised questions of freedom of the press and freedom of speech.

September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009

The bailiff's court rejects the ban on behalf of the book already being published in *Politiken* and on the Internet.

September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009

The ministry of defense suspends Thomas Rathsack and sues him for releasing military secrets. He is risking a sentence of 12 years in jail.

September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009

The minister of defense, Søren Gade, declares that there is an Arabic version of *Jaeger: At War with the Elite* on the Internet at a meeting of foreign politicians and then later on live television. *B.T.*'s (Danish newspaper) homepage publishes the translations only to take them down a few hours later after learning they are machine-translated and illegible.

September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009

The Ministry of Defense rejects rumors saying the Arabic translations were sent to the press from the military's communications department.

October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009

The party of settlement demand to know where the translations had come from. It comes to light that they were fabricated by the head of the IT department of the military command. He is suspended and reported to the police.

October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009

The chief of communications in the military command admits that it was he who leaked the Arabic translations to the press. He is also suspended and reported to the police.

October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009

It is discovered that the department head of the Ministry of Defense knew that the translations were unusable but didn't inform Minister of Defense Søren Gade about it.

October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009

The head of the armed forces steps down. He justifies this by saying he needs to take full responsibility when there is such a large distrust for the armed forces.

February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010

The minister of defense steps down. His reasons are partially the Jaeger case and the later “Laekage”—another case where information about the whereabouts of Jaeger soldiers in 2007 was leaked to the press.

September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Jesper Britze and Lars Sønderskov are both released by the court of the city of Copenhagen in the case surrounding their lying about their knowledge of the Arabic translations of *Jaeger: At War with the Elite*. They are both found guilty in a case of malpractice. The defense is not happy about the outcome and pleads to the high court. Later, they were both dishonorably discharged from the military.

October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010

The military legal investigation unit chooses not to file charges against Thomas Rathsack.

November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010

The military’s human resources department informed Thomas Rathsack that he is allowed to come back to work.

December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Thomas Rathsack receives a letter saying that the defense is still going to give him a disciplinary punishment. Thomas Rathsack therefore chooses to quit out of free will after 16 years of military service.

**The Jaeger Corps – a Danish special operations force (pix 1 - logo)**

## **Danish special operations forces (SOF) units:**

The Jaeger Corps, army ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huntsmen\\_Corps\\_\(Denmark\)\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huntsmen_Corps_(Denmark))))

The Frogman Corps, navy ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danish\\_Frogman\\_Corps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danish_Frogman_Corps))

Sirius Sledge Patrol, navy ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slædepatruljen\\_Sirius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slædepatruljen_Sirius))

## **History of the Jaeger Corps**

During the 1960's the Cold War was at its height and the Berlin Wall was established in 1961. It was decided that Denmark should create a special forces unit in order to gather information during a so-called 'Grey Period' – a prewar-phase between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Thus the Jaeger Corps was established on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1961 as a long range reconnaissance patrol unit (LRRP). During the years following the Cold War (1992-95) the Jaeger Corps was transformed into a SOF-unit.

The Jaeger Corps has participated in special operations on the Balkans (1993-2007), Iraq (2003-08), Afghanistan (2001-present) and Africa. As a part of Task Force K-Bar, the Jaeger Corps was awarded 'The Presidential Unit citation' on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004, for its effort as part of the joint-forces special operations forces group in Afghanistan.

The number of operators is confidential (but way to low).

## **Selection (in total 18 months)**

### **Basic selection test (2 days)**

- Written tests (autobiography, English, mathematics)
- Interview with a psychologist
- PT (Coopers test, 'yo-yo' test, core test)
- Medical examination

## **Pre-course**

- Pre-course 1 (5 days, 6 months before the actual selection course)  
Introduces the candidate to the subjects covered in the actual selection course and gives the candidate a feel for what he must get better at (orienteering, PT, shooting skills etc.).
- Pre-course 2 (2 days, 4 months before the actual selection course)  
More training and evaluation in the above covered subjects.
- Pre-course 3 (2 days, 2 months before the actual selection course)  
More training and evaluation in the above covered subjects with tougher requirements.

### **Patrol Course (8 weeks)**

Physical and mental skills are tested.

- Shooting
- Helicopter insertion/extraction
- Maritime insertion/extraction (RIB, rubber dinghy)
- Orienteering (technique, theory, orienteering race/march, day/night)
- March
- Cold water habituation (7-10° C (44,5 F°)/combat swimming
- PT - running, core
- Demolition
- Medic
- Survival
- Self-confidence tests
- Patrol exercises

Completing the course the candidate will be rated with either 'satisfactory' or 'very satisfactory'. The candidate must have 'very satisfactory' in order to continue on Selection Course.

## **Selection Course (8 weeks, begins 1 week after end of Patrol Course)**

Physical and mental skills are further tested.

- Shooting/CQB
- Helicopter insertion/extraction
- Maritime insertion/extraction (RIB, rubber dinghy)
- Orienteering
- March\*
- Cold water habituation (7-10° C (44,5 F°)/combat swimming
- PT - running, core\*\*
- Demolition/breaching
- Medic
- Survival
- Self-confidence tests
- Patrol exercises

\* During Patrol- and Selection Course the candidate marches and runs in average 2000 kilometers (1250 mi) (final march test: 60 km (37,3 mi)/40 kilo equipment in maximum 12 hrs in terrain + 2 x 50 km/40 kilo equipment in maximum 48 hrs in terrain). The candidate swims in average 45 km (28 mi) in a pool and/or in seawater.

### **\*\* Core Test**

Lunges (max 2 min)	Dips (max 1 min)	Chin-ups (max 1 min)	Coreplank (max 2 min)	Deadlifts (max 1 min)
40 R, 50 kg	8 R, 10 kg	8 R, 10 kg	120 SEK, 20 kg	8 R, 100 kg

Mistakes and forgetfulness are ‘rewarded’ during the courses. For example the author to this article forgot the key to his quarter and was rewarded with a 1.70 meters (5.5 ft) and 20 kilo heavy ‘key’ which he had to carry everywhere at all times in a period of 5 days.

The Selection Course is completed with a self-confidence test (rope-drop from 18 meter/22 yd) where

after the candidates are awarded the insignia of the Jaegercorps.

### **Basic parachuting – static line (2 weeks)**

### **Combat Swimming Course (3 weeks)**

Conducted by The Danish Frogman Corps.

### **The maroon beret**

After completing the Combat Swimming Course the candidates will receive the maroon beret.

### **Basic SOF-training (52 weeks)**

- Mobility (US, Australia, Spain)
- Arctic warfare (Sweden)
- Jungle warfare (Belize)
- Mountaineering (Switzerland)
- HAHO/HALO (Eloy, Arizona/US, Denmark)
- CQB shooting
- Weapons specialist training
- Specialist training (demolition/breaching, medic, comms, intel, sniper)

### **Jaeger Status (operative status)**

The Jaeger badge is handed over. The author of this book was among the 8 candidates who out of 97



completed the course.

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