

Chapter 1: Touchdown!
By SSG Andrew Belet

“We’ll make it/leave your chance to break it/ and on the other side we’ll stake it/ ain’t no need to fake it”

-Liquido “Parkdrive 31”

#

The crisp air was veritably charged with excitement as we broke the huddle. It wasn’t like we would lose, we’d been up all game, but with one play left at the 3-yard line it would be a big “up yours” to our cross-town rivals, the Sentinel High Spartans.

They called my favorite play, scissors left. At five-foot-nine and 205 sopping wet, I didn’t fit the typical mold of a left guard, nor did I strike an imposing figure in the land of huge Montana farm boys. I held my own with the help of my buddy Tom, a lumbering giant of a 17-year old, who played next to me at left tackle.

“Cleveland! Cleveland!” he hollered.

“Steamer! Steamer!” I cried back, the verbal response letting him know that the opposing team was in the right position for the cross-block to work. Having played ball together since sixth grade, we had developed such code-words on our way to being the best duo (as far as teamwork goes, anyway,) on the team.

The Snap!

Tom flew to his right and I was directly behind him, going left. All the hits in all my years of Football combined can’t add up to that one. The fat Spartan son of a bitch never knew what plowed him. I felt Robb Hollenbeck, our star running back, blow past me followed by a sharp whistle blast.

That was game. Me and Tommy tore off our helmets; battered, exhausted, beaten,

and walked dramatically to the sidelines where we proceeded to raise our helmets in triumph amidst thunderous applause. My girlfriend at the time was glaring down at me from her side of the stands. She was a Spartan. I winked at her and walked to the locker room laughing at her and her stupid school.

#

Those who've never had the enjoyable experience of riding in a C-130 don't know what they're missing. The cramped, hot, noisy and all-around uncomfortable aircraft is just the sort of luxury flight one would desire flying into a combat zone.

The lumbering hulk landed hard in Bagram, Afghanistan on Monday, June 6th. D-Day. Also my brother Dan's birthday. The start of Second Battalion, Third Marines first real combat tour since Vietnam.

All the manly posturing has ended. This is show-time and I'm scared shitless. Being a machinegun squad leader in charge of six other Marines doesn't leave me a lot of room to show fear. I put on my bravest face, stand up and, in typical Marine fashion, start to rudely bark orders.

"Let's go! Hurry up! Unload the fucking plane!"

It's what's expected of me as a non-commissioned officer, a corporal.

Unlike Hawaii, where we're stationed, the heat of Afghanistan is dry. I find myself parched, but not covered in sweat like a usual day on the lovely isle of Oahu. We walk, single file, down the windswept flight line of Bagram Air Field. The other Marines glance around at the towering peaks in the distance. I stare straight ahead.

I was born to do this.

Belet's were made to fight. Originally hailing from Switzerland, we have a long

line of military men. My great-great uncle was in the Indian Wars as a cavalryman (Dad still has his Indian Wars medal and his issued rifle,) my grandpa Fred and great uncle Bob were in the Big War; Grandpa in the Army (receiving a battlefield commission and eventually retiring a Major,) great uncle Bob was a Marine (killed in the battle for Guadalcanal; a veritable hero, had a Destroyer Escort ship, the *U.S.S. Belet*, named after him.) The next generation skipped out on war, with only my uncle Bob being in the service as a Navy Officer. I signed up after deciding college wasn't my bag- killing terrorist raghead motherfuckers was.

Even my mom's side (she's 100 percent Irish-the side I take after in the personality department) has had their share of service members. My grandpa Phil did a hitch in the Army, and my two uncles, Andy and Butch, were in the Air Force and Army respectfully. Several of my cousins on that side also joined, including my cousin Rachel with a brief stint in the Army National Guard.

The Irish in me laughs death away as we are issued ammo and assigned cots. The current plan is to stay at Bagram Air Field (BAF) for a few days then take a helicopter out to our Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Jalalabad, currently one of the "hot spots" in the 'Stan thanks to those fucking liberals at Newsweek and their bullshit abuse article. Thanks, pricks.

Our deployment is scheduled for eight months, but could be as long as a year. If that was the case, my unborn daughter would be 11 months old. What a comforting thought-missing the first year of my little girl's life.

I light up a smoke and inhale deeply. Taste's damn good. Jet lag's taking over. Bedtime for Bonzos.

Heh. That's what Mom used to say.

#

5:45.

Jesus Horatio Christ, that's way too early. I was only seventeen, but I was determined to play more than just JV that year. I'd made a pact with myself that I'd be the first one at the school weight room every single day that summer. I'd added ten pounds between freshman and sophomore year, coming in at a fairly bulky 175 pounds. Still, it was hardly a bone-crushing weight for a starting lineman.

Lifting was my life that summer, despite having spent a month-and-a-half in Germany, dropping my old girlfriend and picking up a newer, sportier model, not but a week after I'd deflowered the former. I was an asshole, but I was hell-bent on being a buff asshole.

Coach Dohn pulled up in his little red truck and unlocked the dingy weight room that would soon be torn down to make room for a fancy, machine-filled new one. I'd poured three years into that fucking pile, and I was sad to see it go.

"No partners today, Andy?" Coach asked.

"You know me, Coach," I replied in my teenage, arrogant manner, "no one can keep up with me!"

"You mean no one will wake up with you."

"Well, Coach, there is this one old fart..."

"Watch yourself, there Belet," Coach chided jokingly.

I cinched on a tattered leather weight belt, smacked talcum powder on my hands (for grip) and headed for the flat bench. With all the intensity I could muster, I slammed

through 10 sets, maxing out at 245 pounds for 3 reps. I burned through my workout in two hours, a pace I could never muster up today. My whole body hurt, but I had a “tasty” Mus-L-Blast 2000 protein shake waiting for me at home. Add milk, a scoop of peanut butter and two raw eggs, and you had a foul concoction that only a head-strong teenager could suck down twice a day.

I entered football Hell Week that year at 195 pounds, deeply in love with my new girlfriend, and with an untouchable attitude that scored me a spot on the Varsity Squad at long last.

#

I suck down another smoke, trying to ease my nerves before the bird gets here to take us to the FOB. I'll arrive before the rest of my squad, to get the lay of the land. I've been a squad leader for six months now, long before I picked up the coveted rank of corporal. With two other Cpl.'s in the section, that was a feat in and of itself, awarded to me by virtue of my hard work and determination.

I was lucky to be able to hand-pick my squad, the best as I saw it:

Team 1: Lcpl. Chris Tilley (Team Leader)

Pfc. Dan Plummer (Gunner)

Lcpl. Trent “Moonface” Robbins (Ammo Bearer)

Team 2: Lcpl. William “Smeagol” Eytcheson (Team Leader)

Lcpl. David Whitlow (Gunner)

Lcpl. Tyler “Skeezix” Herman (Ammo Bearer)

They were my boys, and we'd make it through the deployment together or not at all.

The C-1 Shitty comes bearing down, and I dash aboard, pack over one shoulder,

loaded M-16 over the other. It hits me that I'm flying into war, and I can't hold back a little, giddy laugh.

"Fuck yeah!" I yell at a visibly frightened junior Marine across from me. Is it false bravado? Perhaps, but the junior Marine ("boot" as we not-so-affectionately call them) bucks up a bit.

"Fuck yeah, Corporal," he responds.

The bloated hunk of metal zips along at a decent clip (for a C-130 that is,) carrying us to our proverbial destiny. Seated next to a window, I scan the Afghanistan terrain: hilly with scattered villages. I eye the groupings of primitive mud huts cautiously, praying silently that no Al-Qaeda pop out and fire an RPG at us. Without uniforms, the Anti-Coalition fuckers could be anywhere. Afgahn rule number one: DTA-Don't Trust Anybody.

My stomach drops and my balls jump as the bird hops suddenly. Nothing to worry about, judging by the crew chief's reaction (or lack thereof.) The boot across from me looks like he just shit his pants. I smirk at him as if I've flown into war a thousand times.

In truth, my two-and-a-half years in the Green Machine of the Corps have been surprisingly uneventful. I've been to Australia, Korea, Singapore, Okinawa and Thailand. I've spent four months aboard the *U.S.S. Juneau*. I've done boat raids aboard a Combat Rubber Reconnaissance Craft. Meanwhile, my buddies in First Battalion, Fifth Marines are prepping to go to Iraq for Round Three. I don't envy them, but I do feel like a pussy next to these battle-hardened warriors.

After all, the 'Stan isn't even a tenth as hot as Iraq, battle-wise if not heat-wise. Sure we'll have our share of action in the next eight months, but nothing like the bros in

1/5, two of which have already paid the ultimate price. Shit, Afghanistan is a damn vacation compared to the Hell they've seen.

The bird bears down on Jalalabad Air Field (JAF). From here, where my best buddy Cpl. Mike Aaron's company (Headquarters and Support Company) is staying, it's just a click down the road to our small base, J-Bad PRT. We'll move there in a convoy, a ripe target for ACM Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's.) Just my luck we'd get hit right away; the ragheads sure as shit know we're new to the area.

We rush out of the bird, grabbing our packs and sea bags. Amazing how we can fit all our worldly possessions for eight months or more in a medium-size backpack and a large canvas bag. Swiftly, we throw our shit and ourselves into the back of a 7-ton flatbed truck, our moving target for the next click. I sit next to the tailgate, ready to jump out and take command should an IED strike us.

As we drive, I see a group of locals milling about on the side of the road. Are they emplacing an IED? Monitoring our route? Never forget: DTA.

Oh shit, I think as it finally sinks in. Here we go.

#

My knees and back were beaten after a particularly rough football practice. Some nasty players drove home without showering, but not me-I stunk too bad (I've always tended to smell a little worse than your average bear.) Besides, Craig Talarico and I had a plan for the puny-ass Freshman we'd been working on for weeks.

They got done with practice before us, so they always were in the showers first,

which was ideal for us to make them as uncomfortable as humanly possible. Donning black cowboy hats and stuffing fat dips of Copenhagen Long Cut into our lower lips, we marched, buck-ass naked, to the task that hundreds of Seniors before us had done: fucking with the Frosh.

Straining our throats, we howled the loudest, most high-pitched rebel yells we could muster and spit globs of tobacco juice on the unsuspecting Frosh's feet. The fear in their eyes rose when Tally and I began an ear-splitting a capella version of the Garth Brooks hit "Friends in Low Places," slapping those who didn't join in square in their pimply, greasy faces.

"Who here dips?" Tally questioned.

One gangly Frosh stepped forward. "I do," he stammered.

"Oh good," I laughed as Tally and I stuffed his lips with our pre-dipped Copenhagen. To his credit, he held it all in, even spitting a glob of juice on his buddy. I slapped him hard on the back.

"I like you bitch! You're goin' places!"

"Thanks," he mumbled back, his voice garbled with self-doubt.

#

I light up my smoke and think about my wife Lilika's ultimatum before I left:

"Quit smoking or I quit *you*." She was joking. I think.

Quitting is a funny thing. Majority of the time it's a bad thing...a downright horrible thing, in fact. But when you have a habit, especially a bad habit, quitting can be seen as courageous (even though you shouldn't have started in the first place.) This is because quitting a bad habit takes effort and determination, whereas quitting anytime else is the easy way out. Quitting...a novel concept.

It's a clichéd night in J-Bad: clear sky, cool breeze. That clear breeze, however, brings to my nostrils the not-very enticing scent of burning trash and goat shit, doing little to alleviate the constant tension around the camp. Here, with the only light emanating from the burning trash pile fifty meters away, I have plenty of opportunity to disconnect from all the pressures of this war.

Case in point: 2/3 was broken up my entire time stationed with them into five companies. Echo, Fox, Golf (my company,) Weapons and HQ and Support. Someone much higher up than I came up with the cockamamie idea a few months ago to take one

platoon from Echo, Fox and Golf as well as some Marines from each companies weapons platoon (a weapons platoon is broken up into three sections: 0331 machine gunners like myself, who utilize the M240G 7.62 mm machinegun; 0341 mortarmen, firing the 60mm mortar; and 0351 assault men, using various explosives and the SMAW rocket.) Then, the Marines formerly of Weapons Company would disperse amongst the three other line companies and the newly formed *Whiskey Company* so that Echo, Fox, Golf and Whiskey would have two platoons of basic Infantrymen, a light weapons platoon (us) and a heavy weapons platoon.

Very well.

Though this took a bit of getting used to, we adjusted despite losing several close friends and a few boots to Whiskey Company. We continued on our pre-deployment training with my squad of seven as well as Cpl. Mathieu “Pappy” Brule’s squad of six. Things went well until two months ago when we had to give to of our Marines to First Battalion (or 1/3.) Sgt. Curtis Magee, our section leader, chose them from Pappy’s squad, leaving him with only four Marines: Cpl. Justin “Gadget” Carter, Pfc. John Bridgewater, Lcpl. Josh Santel and himself.

Very well.

After much grumbling and complaining, we carried on. Just as we were getting used to this, another monumental change is dropped on us like an anvil on Wile E.

Coyote's furry head as we arrived in J-Bad. Now, they were taking one squad from First Platoon and Second Platoon, making a new Third Platoon within our company. Then, light weapons Platoon is dissolved and we're split like so:

First Platoon gets Pappy, Bridgewater, Tilley and Santel.

Second Platoon gets Myself, Smeagol and Skeezix.

Third Platoon gets no machine gunners.

Sigh...very well.

After we move all of our crap into Second Platoon's quarters (a "cabin" made of plywood and sandbags) my team; no longer a squad, are informed we are getting Tilley back. After moving him in, we are told he was back with Pappy and they were now with Second Platoon. Not but two hours later, we are back with Second. By the end of the hectic day, we are permanatly attached to First.

Fucking shitheads, I think, taking another deep drag of potent Marlboro smoke.

Don't know their asses from a hole in the ground, and these are the fuckers leading me into combat?

As a civilian, I used to watch war movies and wonder how the troops could dare to question their fearless commander. Now, I understand. And Lilika wonders why I can't just up and quit smoking at the drop of a hat.

#

I pulled into the driveway, right behind three trucks and cursed my crappy '85 Honda Accord. I loved the football after-parties. Cheap-ass beer, high-quality pot and loose women. This one would be particularly fun: my girlfriend was out of town for her Soccer game. We were the jock/party couple of our town, our Friday nights usually spent arguing over who was the better driver while inebriated.

I grabbed my thirty case of Keystone Light from the trunk and kicked open the door with a true Montana yell. I recognized a few people, and after saying hello, made my way to the kitchen. Three jock hicks from Big Sky High School stood by the fridge slamming a beer bong. I spied my buddy Aaron "Squirrel" Bennett and threw down the case next to him.

“Dude, 30 case a’ ‘Stones! Righteous!” he hollered.

Normally, Squirrel and I would go to parties together, but that night he had a date (a hot little number from the bowling alley he worked at.) Not being a beer fan, he had already slammed enough liquor to intoxicate himself to the point of cracking open a ‘Stone with me. After meeting his girl, I moved downstairs to check the selection.

Luckily, there were no girls from Sentinel, and the girls from my school didn’t know my girlfriend. No tattle-tales. I spied a likely conquest, sitting on a couch watching two Hmong kids playing Dance Dance Revolution. With beautiful hazel eyes, a kicking body and huge set of lungs, she was my prime target.

“Want a beer?” I questioned, plopping down next to her.

“No.”

Strike one.

“Ok...so, uh, hey, I’m Andy. Want to play DDR?” I tried, gesturing to the videogame.

“No.”

Strike two.

“Want anything?” I pleaded, giving up the “cool guy” attitude.

“No.”

On strike three, she got up and walked away. As an aside from my current anecdote, that sultry vixen would come to be my wife a few years later (“and now you know the rest of the story.”) After this rejection, I astutely decided that getting utterly plowed was more fun anyway.

I was on my tenth or so beer in just under an hour (and getting the spins) when Squirrel and I headed out to the porch for some herbal relief. We smoked a little and then hit the beer bong. Squirrel got all foam, shooting it out his nose. I stepped up to the plate, but before I could dominate the tubing-funnel contraption, a semi-sober sophomore burst through the door out to the porch.

“Cops! Cops!” he bellowed. “Run!”

Unleashing a plethora of swear words, I leapt off the porch, damn near snapping my ankle. I rushed to the nearest fence and hurtled it deftly. I was met with a rush of hot water and bubbles, finding myself submerged in the neighbor’s hot tub. I stripped off my shirt, stuck it under my ass and nervously pretended to kick back, as if I’d been there all

night relaxing.

After a half hour or so (an eternity) I got out and doubled back to the house. There was one patrol car outside, but Po-Po was still inside, undoubtedly harassing one of my unfortunate slow friends who hadn't been able to get away. Praying they hadn't taken down my plate number, I snuck back to my car. Squirrel burst from the hedges and executed a sloppy "Dukes of Hazzard" over my hood and dove in.

"What about your girl?" I asked.

"Fuck her, we gotta roll!" was his slurred response.

Gunning it, we roared into the night, laughing as Squirrel produced two lukewarm 'Stones from his coat pockets.

#

I hop into the turret of the Humvee, my maneuverability slightly hampered by my cumbersome flak jacket and Kevlar helmet. I do a quick functions check on the 240 mounted in front of me then pull my ballistic goggle over my eyes. Today is our first mission, and it's a simple one: go to a nearby village, meet the local police chief, conduct a few foot patrols, head back. Quick. Easy.

I'm on turret with the 240, the second Hummer in the convoy. Skeeze is last, on turret with a MK-19 full-auto 40mm grenade launcher. Smeagol is staying behind for this particular mission. He raises his fore and middle fingers to his lips and turns his hand towards us, the sign for *Good Journey* from the movie "Masters of the Universe."

Our Humvees take off, driving out the front gate. As soon as we pass the Afghan National Army (ANA) gate guards, our whole convoy takes our weapons from condition three to condition one (fully loaded.) I swing my turret to the side, covering the convoy's starboard, and we begin the 45-minute drive through J-Bad to our village.

After hearing the liberal media's take on the war, I expect the Afghans to either cower from fear of the big, bad Americans or hurl rocks, epithets and feces at us. If only those bleeding heart newscasters could see this! The people drop whatever they're doing to wave at us, yelling "Thank You" in their native Pashto or sometimes even in English. Little kids run from literally 300 yards away to give us a thumbs up. Their little faces light up like it's Christmas when I return the sign.

These aren't people who hate Americans. These are people who lived in abject fear of the Taliban Warlords and are so grateful to live their lives again that they'll drop

their work just to thank us. Grown men near tears. Women giving us a flash of their faces underneath their traditional *burkaks*. All this, nearly four years after we came to this land.

This war isn't about oil. It's not about politics. It's about these people!

We finally pull up the village's police station and dismount our vehicles. Our Lt.

And Staff Sgt go inside to meet the local leaders. A few Marines go out to patrol the area while Skeezi and I remain in the turrets. After an hour or so, I get a boot to replace me and I go out on a patrol with a couple of my buddies. Finding nothing unusual, we return to the police station, learning from an informant that there is a missile lying in someone's backyard.

We call Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) to come remove it. They need an escort, so Skeezi's Hummer and another take off to get EOD from JAF. In the meantime, school gets out and we are swarmed by little kids, some nearly fluent in English, all trying to practice it on us. Luckily, I took a two-week crash Pashto course and am willing to practice on them.

"Hello," says Edhammon, who we dub "Eddie."

"Wa-laykum salaam, stah-ray mooshie?" I respond in Pashto.

“Oh! Veddy good. How...are...you?”

“Zech high-um, manana.”

“My name is Edhammon, and...yours?”

“Zma num Andy.”

I hold this conversation enough times that the kids know me as Andy, and I know Eddie, Achmed, Habid and Hexkollah. Despite the warnings I've heard, these kids aren't begging for candy or water, they are simply happy with talking. After two hours, EOD finally arrives and a few of us lead them to the missile.

Analyzing it and determining it a dud, they pick it up and transpo it back to JAF for disposal. Our leaders continue to chat with the Afgahn National Police (ANP) as they bring out steaming plates of Afgahn food for us. Rice, tomatoes and various sauces are the menu today. Not wanting to seem ungrateful, I take a piece of their faltbread as they show me how to use it as a utensil, scooping up the rice and dunking it in sauce. To my amazement, it doesn't taste like a dirty urinal...more like a clean urinal.

Finally, after six hours of schmoozing, we mount up to leave, promising Eddie and his friends we'll return as soon as we can. We pull away, the kids running after us

and waving. For the first time in 21 fairly uneventful years, I almost feel that I'm making a difference.

#

I pulled up to my house, sore and tired. It was a rough game for the Knight's number 69. I had plenty of bruises, which made it difficult to get out of my automobile. I hated away games, especially in Billings, because we didn't get home until 2 a.m. and I had to work the next day, serving samples at Costco.

I lumbered into my room, dropping my pack and flopped on the bed with a groan. No need to set my alarm clock, Dad would wake me up. His bedroom light flicked on down the hall.

"Did you win?" Dad called.

"Yup," I replied curtly.

"Good," he said, the sound of his snoring putting me to sleep.