

Chapter 1

Mission One

Captain Nelson's phone rang as he sat on the tarmac at O'Hare International Airport. The ring tone told him which phone to pick up; "Probably trouble" he thought to himself. He grabbed his secure phone and viewed the screen; a call at mission's end is never good news. Why had this military transport landed at a commercial airport? He reviewed the encrypted message: Nelson and his team, Alpha, were being redirected to Fort Belvoir on an awaiting V22 Osprey from the 12th Aviation

Battalion. That plane had been dispatched for his 13-member team that had just landed. They would be met at the gate where Nelson's team was about to step off the plane. They were to follow directions by the uniformed escorts. This would be their third OP in the last 75 days. After gathering their gear, they followed escorts through TSA security zones to a remote gate with a lone Osprey sitting outside. Looks of surprise greeted the soldiers in combat fatigues with equipment escorted past crowded commercial terminals, as well as the military plane outside. And so, it began.

Five hours later, Nelson sat in a bunker within Fort Belvoir North, just outside of Washington D.C. off the I-495 beltway. He listened to an explanation of a mission that he

knew would again test his skills and the lives of the men. It was now 10:30 PM and they had just learned a military transport would pick up the 13-member team and fly them to Elgin AF Base, Florida. They could sleep on route and for the next 18 hours until they found a chow hall and reassembled in the OP building. Captain Andrew Nelson wrote a letter to his wife Nina, hoping it would be returned to him when he disembarked again on U.S. soil. Like all Ops personnel, letters and belongings would be held pending their safe return. His team members wrote to loved ones as well; no email or calls or text messages were permitted.

For the last six years, Nelson had spent more time away from home and his new wife, Nina, and the life that they had started in their

home outside of Indian Head, VA. Nina was an occupational rehab nurse at the VA. Eighteen months ago, Nelson met Nina in an Arlington pub, and they quickly fell in love. She knew the products of war, the combatants injured both physically and mentally. They married six months later and during the last year, when he was not deployed, he worked on the rustic cabin that the previous owner had designed and built. Their new home, with views of the Potomac River, was almost complete. Nelson had installed underground wiring and new utilities, along with a modern washer, dryer, oven and refrigerator. Their lofted one-bedroom home was a 1300 sq. foot dreamland for both. It was theirs and the Bayport Credit Union, along with another 232 payments. He looked down at his hands

that had signs of the hammering and sawing that he had undertaken during the few days spent together before his last mission. Nelson longed for time with Nina, hopefully starting their family and putting an end to his military life. She had accepted Andrew's military life and had committed to be with him to the end. Nina would live on with that dream.

Like most OPs centers, the plywood underground bunker at Elgin belonged to the 7th Special Forces Group, an Army unit. This space had been approved for the MARSOC command, designed to restrict any ears or eyes from following their missions. Tensions began to set in. Yet, neither Nelson nor his team had yet to learn any particulars.

When Colonel Jason Hahn arrived, the mood changed. Each member gave the

colonel his full attention; what they did affected relationships around the world and stealth was paramount. Colonel Hahn had the operational plan handed out, everyone would now know the objectives and contingencies.

In 36 hours, each of three teams of 13 MARSOC members were to clandestinely night parachute into Ethiopian airspace. They would then work only in darkness and enter western Somalia to begin their mission. The team's overall objectives were to put an end to an insurgency in Somalia, which had struggled to establish a central government within its borders. In addition to the ISIL and al-Shabaab insurgency, a semi-autonomous Somaliland existed in the northwest areas with its own capital and a popu-

lation of 3,500,000 residents within a 68,000 sq. miles area. Somaliland had claimed independence from Somalia but has not yet been recognized as an independent country, despite some foreign governments establishing embassy sites in the capital, Hargeisa.

The mission to put an end to al-Shabaab, al-Qaida and ISIL within Somalia was not the first. Since 2010, U.S. forces had launched 47 attacks on al-Shabaab fighters killed 326 of their members but the groups persisted. Two other identical MARSOC teams landed 10 miles north of Nelson's team. They were to eliminate or disrupt these groups to aid in stabilizing the existing government, all in a covert manner while keeping US interests dark. Its objective was for Somaliland to then take control of the lower portion of

this area and create one central government. Although vastly outnumbered, the SOF members were the best trained in the world and had support of air and sea resources, if needed.

Ethiopia. Landed. It was now 2:00 AM and the 90° F. temperature didn't enhance their welcome. Each member brought in 100 pounds of gear, food and water; enough for one week. After that, their team logistics specialists were to locate and secure provisions; there was no predetermined exit time or location. The teams had two native Somalian resource members who had been promised US Green Cards. They had spent 18 months being vetted, trained, and received English instructions in exchange for being given a path to US Citizenship.

Nelson's team had previously met Mission Specialists "Derk", and "T". They would now be field tested, in spite of the fact that they had never returned to Somalia until tonight.

Nelson's team Alpha was successfully on the ground. All members were accounted for with no injuries and equipment fully functional. He reached Beta and X-Ray on the encrypted radio, and they too were ready. Objective One was a go: all three teams coordinated their 8-mile movement through the desert roads and dry streambeds until they would reach 2 miles outside of Arba Minch, Ethiopia. OPs at Elgin had given them three locations to secure ground transportation. After a 5-hour hunt, they found what passed for a supply of 4-wheel drive Deluxe Toyota trucks- each about twenty years old,

but practically new in this country. With less than the anticipated resistance, the teams fueled up and moved quietly to Dal Dal- an area just outside of Somalia's western border. There were no manned borders- just dirt roads and the route planned was to remain within Ethiopia as they traveled east. The US and exiting Ethiopian government maintained a working relationship.

Three hours later, Nelson had his coms officer, Specialist Ray Dickson, contact Team Beta leader Brian and Team X-Ray leader Teddy to ask their status. This time, there were no radio replies. One-hour later with no replies, Nelson had Dickson send a flash transmission to Elgin AF OPs for a drone flyover to try to pinpoint each team and look for movements. The United States military has deployed mil-

itary manpower and equipment in over forty countries. Contact was made for a U.S. drone from Rosh Pinna airbase in Israel to support their mission. Six hours later, both teams had been located and were making progress toward the Dal Dal meet up. It would take almost twenty-four hours to reach the Somalin border. The day was just about to warm up. In addition, their water and food supplies were limited and securing potable water would become a premium.