

## **BEYOND THE ASSESSMENT**

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*To my son, Elijah. There is no more extraordinary gift from God than having you in my life.*

*To my beautiful wife, Paloma. My forever and always.*

*May I always be a husband and father who deserves your love and admiration.*

*Lastly, to the young man reading this and aspiring to improve. Never stop pursuing excellence.*

THE HARDER THE CONFLICT, THE MORE GLORIOUS  
THE TRIUMPH.

WHAT WE OBTAIN TOO CHEAP, WE ESTEEM TOO  
LIGHTLY.

IT IS DEARNESS ONLY THAT GIVES EVERYTHING ITS  
VALUE.

I LOVE THE MAN THAT CAN SMILE IN TROUBLE,  
THAT CAN GATHER STRENGTH FROM DISTRESS  
AND GROW BRAVE BY REFLECTION.

IT IS THE BUSINESS OF LITTLE MINDS TO SHRINK;  
  
BUT HE WHOSE HEART IS FIRM  
AND WHOSE CONSCIENCE APPROVES HIS  
CONDUCT,  
  
WILL PURSUE HIS PRINCIPLES UNTO DEATH.

~ THOMAS PAINE ~



# INTRODUCTION

“Men, congratulations on the success you have achieved here after a challenging 21 days. Own it. Enjoy it. Celebrate it. You’ve earned that much. With that being said, as you step onto those buses and make your way back to your normalcy, your friends, and your family, do not make the catastrophic mistake of forgetting the following: you are always being assessed. Today, you have earned an opportunity to prove that you have the character and the capability to call yourself a Green Beret one day... one day. Now grab your bags and get on the buses.”

-You are always being assessed-

Those words have resonated with me since I completed Special Forces Assessment and Selection. SFAS: a 21-day back-breaking, knee-buckling job interview shrouded in secrecy and lauded in lore. 21 days of grueling events tailored

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to expose the physical, mental, and character deficiencies of an individual in order to identify and select those that are most likely to succeed in the next phase of training: 2-3 years in the Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC or the Q-Course). At the end of those 21 days, you are handed a piece of paper on Army letterhead: a memorandum for record. Printed on it is nothing more than your identifying information, and at the bottom of the document, two words: "Result: Selected." I read those words over and over again, at first in utter disbelief, then in sheer excitement, and finally in genuine gratitude.

The allure of the military has always been incontrovertibly present in my life. I did not grow up in a military family. My mother always wondered where my desire to join the Army came from. Growing up, I didn't know anyone who had served, but I was perceptive to the fact that society at large expressed genuine gratitude and true admiration for those who wore the uniform. I cannot trace the origins of my passion for the military to an epic story of a close family member returning home after conducting combat operations overseas, or sitting on my grandfather's lap while he held a medal awarded to him and recounted his experiences in the line of duty. Frankly, my earliest recollections take me back to when I was nine years old.

Like many veterans today, I was just a child when the abhorrent September 11th attacks occurred. I was too young to comprehend the magnitude of what I was witnessing. Still, the images I watched on TV, coupled with the somber silence that had settled in the living room as my family attentively watched those events unfold, made it abundantly clear that something was wrong. As time went on, though, I noticed a particularly unique aura begin to manifest. At nine years of age, I couldn't quite put into words what I observed, but as I look back now, I realize that this aura can only be described as solidarity. This sense of solidarity was not endemic to

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my immediate surroundings. On the contrary, everywhere I looked, American flags hung proudly, images honoring first responders were posted on every magazine cover, and deafening uproars of pride could be heard regularly from crowds at sporting events as military aircraft flew overhead. This solidarity permeated the country. This was a genuine, unadulterated sense of nationalism, and it was contagious. I felt proud of my country, and as such, I felt a call to defend it.

This sentiment of pride in my country, pride in calling myself an American, pride in answering my nation's call, and pride in what the United States represents to the world has never dwindled.

Fourteen years after the 9/11 attacks, I would find myself standing on a stage, dressed in my Army Service Uniform, prepared to receive my green beret from the General in charge of the United States Army Special Operations Command, Lieutenant General Kenneth E. Tovo. This would become one of the proudest days of my life. After enduring some of the most grueling physically and mentally demanding training the United States military has to offer, I became an Army Special Forces soldier and earned my green beret.

Today, after a decade of service to my country, I have received an Honorable Discharge from the U.S. Army and have set my sights on executing my responsibilities as a father of a wonderful son to the best of my abilities. Those years spent fighting through dense vegetation in the woods of Fort Liberty (formerly and forever in my heart known as Fort Bragg), North Carolina, jumping out of aircraft in the frigid air of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, and clearing buildings alongside my ODA (Operational Detachment - Alpha) in the isolated villages of Afghanistan have taught me a few things. It is now my responsibility to share these lessons learned. This responsibility is one that I do not take lightly, particularly as Western culture has transformed into one that

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is devoid of the values and principles that foster a burgeoning society. While it is to my son that I dedicate this book, I write this also with the hope that it will positively impact and shape the lives of many ambitious young men looking to find their way through the ill-defined and meandering trail that is life.

Those currently taking the lead role in shaping our culture, and many in positions of political authority, have engaged in what can only be described as the dereliction of their duty to inculcate the importance of strong virtues in the minds of our youth. It is incumbent on us as a society to change that. A people actively disseminating the lessons learned through individual life experiences, sharing these with our communities at large, forming societies that celebrate virtuous practices, and passing these on from generation to generation shape our society's standard of morality.

Our youth, particularly our young men, have been pummeled with relentless vitriol. The self-proclaimed moral arbiters of our time have engaged in a concerted effort to indoctrinate our boys with falsities under the guise of civility. Masculinity has been deemed toxic. From the indiscriminate and often sexist use of the term "mansplaining" to the naive belief that violence is never the answer (a belief prevalent only in the insulated bosom of an affluent society), there has been a direct assault on the characteristics that forge the ideal male archetype. Controversial opinion: We need disciplined men endowed with prudence and capable of brutal violence. My obligation and moral duty as a father is to instill exemplary virtues in my son. Every day, I pray that God help me embody these virtues, knowing my son will look to me as his role model.

The purpose of this book is not to recount tales of heroism or to give a detailed account of my life in the military. It is not intended to critique any one side of the political aisle or promote any one political candidate. (If you feel that I

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have already run afoul of this, perhaps the question is, “What values and practices do your political leaders promote and endorse?”) The purpose of this book is much simpler but necessary: to share the wisdom that I have accrued so far in my life. I am in no way, shape, or form alleging to be a subject matter expert on how to live. If any of you find the how-to guide for living a perfect life, please don’t hesitate to reach out and share it with me. God knows I can use it. As a matter of fact, the large majority of the lessons I’ve learned, dare I say, the most important lessons I’ve learned, have been imparted to me by the scarring practice of enduring past my points of failure.

Ultimately, I hope this book serves as a tool for exercising self-analysis, a tangible challenge to pursue excellence, and a reference you, the reader, can reach for during times of weakness. All in all, this book is my attempt at sowing a seed that, with God’s help, will fall on good ground somewhere, spring up, and yield a crop a hundredfold.



## CHAPTER 1

# STRENGTH THROUGH SELF-INTEGRITY

“Not one of you in this formation has ever deployed overseas. You’ve never set up a patrol base. You’re not an expert in any weapon system. Hell, that guy over there hasn’t even figured out how to properly set up his uniform... your name tape is on the wrong side, Private. Fix it. So why are you here? What do you have to offer the Special Forces Regiment? Here’s where you can start: Be an athlete.”

There are two paths to becoming a U.S. Army Green Beret. Regardless of rank or experience, everyone must attend SFAS (henceforth referred to as “Selection,” as this is the more commonly used term in military colloquialism). Many volunteer to attend Selection after serving in a different military occupational specialty for a few years. More often than not, these individuals come from the Infantry, where many of the fundamental skills

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that make an effective Green Beret are honed.

My life took me through the second path. I joined the Army Special Forces through the 18X (eighteen x-ray) program. This program was designed to take individuals with no prior military experience and, upon completing all other prerequisites, grant them the opportunity to attend Selection. As an 18X, your initial military contract indicates that you are a Special Forces (SF) Candidate. I would be remiss if I did not stress the following: An 18X is a Special Forces CANDIDATE. The only thing that this contract guarantees is that you will be given the opportunity to try out for Special Forces at Selection if and only if you make it there. The road to Selection alone is enough to make many SF candidates quit.

Like every service member before and after me, my first step to calling myself a soldier (never mind a Special Forces Candidate) was through the doors of an Army Recruiter's office. While this may seem like a simple administrative step, the road to joining the United States Armed Forces ends here for 93% of the 340 million Americans that make up the U.S. population. Just under 1% of the population currently serves, and a more significant 6% are veterans. This leaves approximately 316 million Americans who either never walk through those doors or are immediately disqualified from joining. Two of the most common reasons for disqualification are obesity and physical inactivity.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), as of 2023, 90% of military applicants are in the 17-24 age range. Of these, 1 in 3 are too heavy to serve ( $BMI > 27.5$ ). Of those who remain, only 3 in 4 indicate engaging in physical activity sufficiently strenuous to prepare them for success in Basic Training.

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Let's briefly engage in some hypothetical math. 100 people enter a recruiting center expressing interest in joining the Armed Forces. 33 are too heavy to serve. Of the remaining 67 individuals, 20 don't engage in the physical activity necessary for success. That leaves us with 47 of the original 100 interested, and we haven't even assessed these remaining 47 for educational deficits, criminal records, or drug abuse. Simply put, the current health status of Americans is a National Security crisis.

Thankfully, I fall into the small cohort of individuals who engaged in challenging physical activity throughout my upbringing. During my high school tenure, I always participated in team sports. From Varsity Soccer to Varsity Lacrosse, athletics was always a part of my life. There is no doubt in my mind that engaging in this type of activity during such a formative time helped foster my passion for athleticism. But playing on the Varsity lacrosse team in high school, while undoubtedly an excellent primer for a life of disciplined athleticism, is not the same as volunteering to join the most lethal fighting force that has ever existed on the planet.

The drive and ambition, however, were there gnawing at me every day. It may have been the intensity and thrill-embedded advertising on TV depicting young soldiers running out of the back of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter in their combat gear, rifle in hand, and night optics lowered to eye level as they scanned the area for threats. Maybe it was the command and control that the unit leaders demonstrated as they used hand and arm signals to direct their troops while maintaining stealth and violence of action. More than likely, it was all of the aforementioned factors coupled with the innate trait inscribed in the DNA of many young men: a subconscious

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yet immutable characteristic which is the human drive to fight for those they care for, to belong in a society, identify as a member of it, and defend it at all costs. Whatever the reason, I wanted to be a part of something great. I wanted to set myself apart and conquer the seemingly unconquerable. Before stepping inside that recruiter's office, I knew I wanted to serve and do so as an Army Special Forces soldier. This was the beginning of my monomyth, my hero's journey.

My initial conversation with the recruiter felt brief but to the point. Respectfully and confidently, I informed him that I wanted an 18X contract. The recruiter, a senior non-commissioned officer, invited me to sit down and go over the program's prerequisites. It was abundantly evident that the Special Forces regiment sought men who exceeded the physical and intellectual standards. His next question made that undoubtedly clear: "Can you be here tomorrow at 0900 for a physical fitness (PT) test?"

"Yes," I answered immediately.

"Good," he replied. "I'll see you then."

"Ok. Thank you," I replied. The next thing I knew, I was walking out of the same set of doors I had just walked in through. When I walked in, I was a young man interested in Special Forces but had taken no actionable steps. Walking out, I had a date set for an initial PT test. My performance on this assessment would determine whether or not I was ready to be successful at Basic Training. I could not leave room for anyone to doubt my readiness. This brief interaction at the recruiter's office set into motion a chain of events that would change my life forever.

A few weeks later, after completing my PT test and all other medical and administrative requirements,

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I was on a bus headed to Infantry One Station Unit Training in Fort Moore, Georgia. There, PT was a daily event. You could expect to complete runs, rucks, calisthenics, more runs, obstacle courses, and more runs. From day one, there was no doubt that physical training was a part of daily life. Soon thereafter, I graduated as the Distinguished Honor Graduate of my class and went on to Airborne School, where I earned my Jump Wings. Finally, upon graduating from Airborne School, I was off to Fort Liberty, North Carolina, where I was greeted by a cadre of Green Berets. Initial guidance: Be an athlete.

While the necessity of athleticism in the military may seem obvious, it is essential to discuss what it says about an individual's nature. The fact is that athleticism is not just a requirement to confront the physical stressors a soldier will face successfully. It is also evident proof of highly sought-out characteristics. Physical fitness is the most fundamental degree of integrity. It is integrity to one's self. Moreover, it is a visibly evident marker of discipline. Not just discipline of the body but of the mind as well. No one will claim that the daily practice of engaging in voluntary physical stress and rejecting the instant gratification of gluttony is easy. On the contrary, we are hardwired to seek out the most metabolically efficient path through life. There is a word for that, however. We call that comfort. Being comfortable is a status quo, a default modus operandi, a state of homeostasis where there is no change, and where there is no change, there is no improvement. Physical fitness is a direct affront to this status quo. It is leveraging your free will and agency against your body's reluctance to expend energy in order to improve. This requires an active effort on a daily basis, regardless of your level of motivation. If your

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effort is solely dependent on your level of motivation, you will never succeed. Stripped of all logical reasoning and verbose explanation, the concept is simple: Physical fitness must get done, so get it done.

A common mantra when lifting weights is “work to failure.” For those unfamiliar with this saying, it means to continue lifting the weights until you are physically unable to complete another repetition with proper form. Exercising in this manner relays an incredibly effective message to your brain, triggering a physiological response that directs every function in your body to do one thing: improve. Failure is often depicted as a weakness, but it is impossible to identify the maximum of your potential until you reach your point of failure. Suddenly, the fear of failure sounds absurd. Why fear that which will drive you to grow? The answer is pride. We value our ego more than the process we must undergo to improve.

The benefits of athleticism do not end there. Physical fitness is an excellent practice in delayed gratification and a cognitive and emotional process demonstrating maturity. The immature mind requires immediate acknowledgment, praise, or reward for a single step in the right direction. The mature mind can set a feasible goal, identify the steps necessary to achieve it, work tirelessly day in and day out, and celebrate only when that goal has been achieved.

These characteristics are essential not only in the military but in our workforce as a whole. I’d go so far as to say that the innate traits of the physically fit should be those our culture encourages society to emulate.

Western culture, however, has embraced and promoted the antithesis thereof. Our social structures and technological advancements have, in many ways,

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made us more efficient, effective, and productive, but in a myriad of other ways, they have regressed our mental maturity.

My generation was at the forefront of the social media boom. What was once called MySpace (founded in 2003) and T-Mobile's MyFaves (founded in 2006) have evolved to become modern-day FaceBook, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. While they have facilitated the proliferation of ideas and connected the entirety of our world in ways previously unfathomable, they have regressed our psychological reward pathways to those indistinguishable from that of a Pavlovian dog on Day 1 of its training. We crave likes, approval, agreement, and praise. Worst yet, we can choose with whom we voice our opinions. Those who disagree can opt to leave. We are then left standing in an echo chamber, perpetually unchallenged in our beliefs or ideas, never obliged to scrutinize or test our preconceived notions against formidable counterarguments. The steady IV drip of synthetic digital approval within the inner sanctum of our ideological echo chamber offers a steel-clad defense against the possibility of confronting our cognitive dissonance.

While the discipline of physical fitness and the habit of social media engagement may seem unconnected, nothing can be further from the truth. One fosters self-worth, maturity, and delayed gratification, while the other promotes self-criticism, immaturity, and instant gratification. According to Digital 2024, 70% of Americans use social media. However, the CDC reports that in 2020, only 24.2% of adults aged 18 and over met the 2018 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans for aerobic and muscle-strengthening activities.

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These statistics are quite telling of our culture, but more importantly, they shed light on what our youth focuses the majority of their attention on. Rather than engaging in physically demanding activities that build character and serve as a catalyst for maturity, our young men are drowning in a swamp of digital media with ever-increasing anxiety and depression. The solution is simple: Be an athlete. The physical and mental benefits are incontrovertible, but more importantly, they build an unbreakable character. Taking ownership of your mind and structuring a life of discipline that diligently maintains your health and fitness is the first degree of order that you or any one individual can create. Discipline creates habit, and healthy habits create order. Order in the heat of battle or amidst the complexities of life is an invaluable asset.





## CHAPTER 2

# MOVE WITH A SENSE OF PURPOSE

“Hey, guy! Not you. Yes! You! Get over here. Don’t walk! RUN! MOVE WITH A SENSE OF PURPOSE! We do not walk anywhere here. Forget about walking. You are no longer physically capable of walking. From now on, you want to get from Point A to Point B, you run.”

Selection demands the highest degree of physical effort from every candidate. You may feel like you’ve given it your all, but Selection will require that you give more. While failure to meet the physical requirements is why some candidates are not selected, many others quit. More often than not, this is a symptom of a deeper and more insidious problem: their reason for being there is no longer sufficient. The battle was lost first in the mind. Self-doubt and fear of failure are often the driving forces that convince a candidate that he can no longer continue despite the fact that the body can continue to endure. As

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such, while physical challenges are inevitable, success depends more heavily on conquering the fears and doubts within.

Selection was approximately 3 weeks or 21 days long when I attended in 2015. These three weeks were split into three sections. Week 1 was Gate Week. Week 2 was Land Navigation Week, and Week 3 was Team Week. Week 1 was used to assess our ability to perform certain pre-stipulated physical events to standard. These included but were not limited to the Army Physical Fitness test, a series of runs, and a series of rucks.

For those unfamiliar with what a ruck is, it is a movement by foot with a large backpack set to a predetermined weight. At Selection, this weight was generally set to 60 pounds dry. This meant that it did not include the weight of the water you were required to carry. When you accounted for the additional gallon and a half of water required, you were at approximately 70 pounds. Your ruck would then be weighed at the end of the assessment. Failure to meet the prescribed weight would quickly result in an integrity violation. Naturally, you would throw in an extra 2-3 pounds in order to guarantee that you would not be “that guy.”

By the time I got to Selection, running and rucking was a regular occurrence. Putting miles on your feet under heavy weight is just part of life in the Army. Everything at Selection, however, is anything but a regular occurrence.

Before every physical event, we receive an initial briefing. These are designed to provide specific details about the event and point out safety measures implemented to mitigate injuries. The opening line of the initial brief always stood out to me, though. It went

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something like this:

“You will conduct a movement by foot over an undisclosed distance with an undisclosed time hack...”

In other words, “Be prepared to successfully perform in unknown and unforgiving terrain, with minimal information, under mental and physical stress.” Given this training environment, only one thing will drive you to succeed or quit: your mind. Every day, every night, every event, and every step, it is imperative that you keep the reason you’re there at the forefront of your mind. Failure to do so will cloud your understanding of your purpose.

Today, young men are finding it increasingly difficult to find purpose. The inevitable result is inaction, which, over time, results in mental and physical atrophy. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that neither the human psyche nor the human body is designed to operate under these conditions.

So what do we do about this? The solution is two-fold. Our young men require both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. When one is lacking, the other should be supplemented.

Intrinsic motivation is by far the preferred source. It is not tethered to anyone or anything. It is organic and endogenous, but it generally requires a high degree of mental maturity, the development of an identity, and a clear understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses. This begins at home. That said, not every young man is blessed with a healthy upbringing that fosters an adequate degree of self-worth and confidence. Given this unfortunate reality, we, as a society, must make unrelenting efforts to instill a sense of self-worth and confidence in our young men. The more we do

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so, the more capable our young men will be to operate autonomously amidst struggles, turmoil, and mishaps.

Disregarding our responsibility to the men of our society has detrimental effects that are palpable to society and destructive to families. Men have significantly higher rates of alcoholism and suicide. According to the CDC, 76% of suicide deaths are from men. This is the reality of our day-to-day life at home. As Green Berets, we train to operate in war zones and areas of operations outside of the United States. However, most of our stressors and challenges originate at home, not overseas. If you ask any combat veteran, they will not hesitate to tell you they would much rather be back in a combat environment.

A 2021 study by Brown University shows that veteran suicides account for four times as many of the deaths when compared to the number of personnel killed in action. We can provide remedial training and assistance for soldiers struggling in any training event. We cannot, however, assist our soldiers and veterans who have already taken irreversible action because of their perceived loss of purpose and hope.

I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to provide a word of motivation to you, the reader. I do not know your circumstances or the trials and tribulations that you may be traversing. I do not know your life, your upbringing, the people you interact with regularly, your successes, or your failures. I do, however, know that if you're reading this now, you have breath in your lungs, blood coursing through your body, and a mind capable of understanding this: we need you.

Humanity needs your talents, your skills, your dedication, your effort, and your passion. Your family needs your presence. This is your calling and, as such,

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your responsibility: be there for a family and a society that needs you. Contrary to what you may have been told, you are irreplaceable. There has never been nor will there ever be another you. Your absence is a void that could never be filled.

Do not let your circumstances dictate who you are as a man. Take ownership of your agency. Harness your ability to enact change. Positively influence the lives of those around you. Make learning and growing a habit. See every waking moment of your life as an opportunity because as long as you can breathe, you live a meaningful life of purpose. Now, standby for instructions on how to go about the rest of your day:

You will conduct a movement through life amidst uncertainty, unknown challenges, and periods of darkness under the weight of imposed and self-imposed burdens. Given the support network of individuals around you operating under the same parameters, you will work as a cohesive unit, set your sights on your aspirations, and achieve them. While the distance to travel and time allotted is unknown, voluntarily withdrawing is unauthorized.

Now move with a sense of purpose.



## CHAPTER 3

# IF YOU QUIT NOW, YOU WILL ALWAYS QUIT IN LIFE

During one of our longer ruck marches, I distinctly recall when the fatigue started setting in. Despite the fact that we were nearing the end of the first week, it was still only the beginning. I could not let fatigue start clouding my mind. “Focus on the now,” I would tell myself. My feet, however, slowly began to drag. At some point, everyone reaches a point of physical exhaustion where each step feels like you’re chained to the ground. Then you look to your horizon, and all that lies ahead is a seemingly endless dirt road laden with the footprints of all the soldiers ahead of you. Again, I could not let those thoughts in. “Every step is one step closer to the finish line,” I would tell myself.

Suddenly, I felt my footing slip underneath me. Under the weight of more than 70 pounds, I felt my ankle roll. All of that weight collapsing on my joint forced me

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to topple over. I got myself up and took another step. Agonizing pain shot up through my leg from my ankle. I could barely walk, let alone carry an additional 70 pounds on my back.

Darkness started creeping into my mind. A terrifying fear that maybe I would not be able to finish began to take shape and overcome my confidence. "After just one week, this is it?" I thought to myself. I took another step, and again, knee buckling pain.

Before we initiated the ruck, we were briefed on actions to take should we get injured. We were instructed to take off our ruck, lay it on the side of the road with the fluorescent safety vest we were given facing the road, put on our red headlight, and turn it on. I could not wrap my head around this slowly becoming a reality. An injury at Selection, if it makes you incapable of completing the course, results in a medical drop. That is to say, you are dropped from the course, encouraged to get medical attention, and maybe allowed to return at a later date. The reality is that it's only a very small percentage of individuals that ever make it back.

I stood there alone on a long and desolate dirt road. I was physically alone, but my thoughts and a 70-pound ruck were with me. With tears welling up in my eyes, I took the sweat-drenched ruck off my back. I moved five meters to my right and laid my ruck on the side of the road with the reflective vest facing out. I reached into one of the side pouches on my ruck, took out my headlamp, set it to its red setting, and put it on my head. Then I waited. There was nothing, only utter silence in my head and my immediate surroundings. Nothing but the sound of the whistling wind. I don't know for how long I sat on the side of the road. I just know that I sat there and

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waited for whatever happened next.

My mind suddenly spoke up—a singular thought—a memory that inspired me when I was about nine years of age. I recalled images of a Marine Corps Drill Instructor exuding command presence who said, “If you quit now, you will always quit in life.” Over and over, this voice reverberated in my mind: “IF YOU QUIT NOW, YOU WILL ALWAYS QUIT IN LIFE!”

“I refuse to quit,” I said to myself. Again, “I refuse to quit,” and I removed my headlamp. “I refuse to quit,” as I stuffed it back in my side pouch. “I REFUSE to quit!” I picked up my ruck, threw it over my back, and took one step forward. Again, the pain. “I REFUSE TO QUIT!” I took another step. Then another and another. 10 feet down the road, I took another step. 100 feet down the road, I took yet another step. Then a mile, then one more mile, and another.

Suddenly, I could hear voices far off in the distance. As I walked further, they became audibly more clear. Eventually, I could see movement far off in the distance. There was the finish line. Everyone who had finished stood in line, waiting for their rucks to be weighed to ensure they completed the event to standard. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, and I moved as fast as I possibly could, regardless of the pain, fatigue, and mental exhaustion. I took every step necessary until I made it to the finish line. I didn’t know if I completed the ruck in the amount of time required to move on to week two. I knew one thing: I refused to quit.

A singular decision I made that day shaped the trajectory of my life. Years ago, this decision was set in motion when my mind was forever marked by that one voice that said, “If you quit now, you will always quit in

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life.” Years later, it shaped me into the man I am today.

The irrefutable truth is that our thoughts are a byproduct of the content that we consume. What we read and listen to, the people we surround ourselves with, their behaviors, opinions, and ideas ultimately mold us for better or worse. In an age where media influence is ubiquitous and unavoidable, it is imperative that we be judicious in what we choose to focus our attention on.

I challenge you, the reader, to listen to a five-minute motivational video every morning. Start your day with a message of positivity. Open your eyes, express gratitude for the opportunity to experience life, and immerse yourself in messages that will inspire you.

At some point, we are all confronted with unexpected challenges, moments of self-doubt, and weakness. When you actively pursue a seemingly unattainable goal, endeavor to be greater, or excel in any aspect of your life, understand that you will be confronted with unforeseen challenges that will rock you to your core and make you question whether you can take another step. That is the price of excellence.

Ironically, we often pray and wish for a more tenacious spirit. When the opportunity to practice tenacity presents itself, however, we quit. We stop and sit on the side of the road and wait for things to magically get easier or for the ruck to get lighter. At these crucial moments in life, you can instantaneously affect the individual you will become.

What sources of inspiration and motivation do you have to resort to in these moments of mental fragility? When the odds are stacked against you, what recourses does your mind have to resort to? While these are questions only you can answer, the fact remains:

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quitting only gets easier after you do it once.

Throughout my life, I have continued to face challenges that have shaken me to my foundation as a human being. I wish I could say that there haven't been other instances in my life where I did not figuratively take off my ruck, sit on the side of the road, and wait. That would be a blatant lie. My only hope is that you, the reader, can relate to these experiences, look to that beaten path in front of you, and identify the many footprints of those who have already been there. Every single one of those footprints is a marker of tenacity, a remnant of dedication, and evidence of what is possible.

Take the next step. You're one step closer to the finish line.



## CHAPTER 4

# CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLE & INFLUENCE THE VARIABLES

Delta Two, this is Echo Two. Come in. Over.” Bobby, one of our Special Forces Communications Sergeants, came in over the radio crystal clear. I reached up to my push-to-talk while clearing a nearby building with our Afghan partner force, pressed the button, and replied.

“Roger. This is Delta Two. I got you Lima Charlie (Loud & Clear). What’s up, bro?”

In a calm and collected manner, Bobby responded, “Hey, you mind coming to our building? We need you over here.”

“Roger. Moving to you,” I replied.

I exited the building through a decrepit wooden door barely held in position after our breach, walked into the cold air of an Afghan winter night, and made my way to where Bobby and his team were located.

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Again, my radio came up, and again, in Bobby's calm demeanor, he said, "Hey Delta Two, we need you here fast."

In a combat environment, clearing structures is meticulously and methodically conducted. Speed matters, but it is rarely a metric of success when the goal is thoroughness. Therefore, when a guy on my team got on the net and calmly asked that I, as one of the Special Forces Medics adjacent to him, get to his location fast, I knew something was wrong.

"Got it. Moving," I replied as I immediately broke out into a run toward his building.

As I entered his building, I walked through a cloud of smoke reminiscent of an explosive breach to find a crowd of our Afghan partner force talking loudly to one another as they stood around an individual lying on the ground in a small pool of blood. While I could not understand them, the expressions on their face were conveying concern. The urgency was immediately made clear.

I pushed through the small crowd, took a knee next to the patient, and unslung my rifle from across my body so that I could have more room to work. With one hand, I rested my rifle across the back of my ankle and sat on it to maintain accountability of my weapon. With the other, I beckoned for our translator and asked him to tell the partner force to give me room to work. This also created a space between my knowns and unknowns as I inevitably placed myself in a position of increased vulnerability every time I treated a casualty.

All the while, my eyes scanned the patient, searching for the source of his major bleeding. Within seconds, my Mystery Ranch medical pack was unslung

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and resting on the ground beside me. The zipper on every pocket was centered, and all of the pouches were organized in such a manner that allowed me to flow through my initial assessment algorithm efficiently and treat my patients quickly and effectively.

“What happened?” I asked the translator as I took out a tourniquet from my hemorrhage pouch and placed it around the patient’s right arm, where I identified an extensive laceration and one source of his bleeding. Immediately after that, I reached for trauma shears and started cutting his clothes in order to visualize the rest of his current state of being and identify any other injuries.

“He was standing behind the door when the explosive breach occurred,” he replied.

“Got it. Ask him if he can hear me,” I returned as I attempted to assess his level of consciousness. If he responded verbally, it also informed me that he had a patent airway.

He replied in his local dialect, and the translator relayed, “He says he’s okay, but it hurts to breathe.”

I moved forward in my algorithm and assessed his respirations. In my head, I talked to myself, “I have bilateral rise and fall of the chest. He’s taking 1 breath every 10 seconds.”

I identified multiple lacerations to his chest. That was not the time to assess the severity and depth of the injury, so I took out a chest seal from my Respirations pouch and placed it over his injuries to ensure that this didn’t progress into a pneumothorax (or air in the chest cavity).

My hands then reached for his wrist and neck as I searched for a carotid and radial pulse. Both were palpable, indicating sufficient blood was still present in

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his body, preventing him from going into hypovolemic shock. Still, he had already lost some blood, and his body could've been compensating. He needed intravenous access to administer fluids and medicine.

Finally, I made every effort to mitigate the likelihood of him developing hypothermia by exposing only the parts of his body I needed to be exposed in order to treat him effectively.

A few minutes later, the Ground Force Commander came in and said, "Hey, bird is en route."

"Roger," I replied. It was time to pack up the patient and prepare him for a quick flight to our local Forward Resuscitation Surgical Team.

I gathered all my equipment, recruited the assistance of some of our partner forces, got him on a litter, and moved towards a predetermined Medical Evacuation site. I reached for the Infrared laser on the barrel of my rifle and marked the ideal location for the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter to land.

The helicopter's rotor blades slicing through the night became audibly louder as it approached. I carefully laid my body across my patient to protect him and his treatments from the dirt and debris the landing kicked up. Once the helicopter was safely on the ground, we moved our patient towards the side door, and I relayed all the pertinent information to the flight medic.

In less than a few minutes, the bird was back in the air, bringing the patient to a higher level of care.

Soon thereafter, there was silence.

Only a couple of years before this event, I attended the Special Operations Combat Medic course. In this course, we are often assessed on our ability to treat trauma patients in a deployed setting. The attrition rate is

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incredibly high. Your attention to detail often determines success in this course.

During one of the early phases of the course, one instructor imparted to me a mantra that I practice in every aspect of my life to this day.

See, in one of my trauma practice runs, he saw me digging through my bag, making every effort to find the equipment I needed. He could tell I was struggling, so he pulled me aside and asked me to walk him through my bag. Suffice it to say it was lacking in organization. He grabbed one pouch and started neatly organizing every item in a manner that enabled him to reach in and grab what he needed next without any struggle or hesitation. He then centered every zipper and organized the pouches in a manner that made patient care more efficient. As he did so, he said one thing very slowly and clearly, “Control the controllable. Influence the variables.”

Life happens on life’s terms. This is not just a dismissive platitude but rather a reality that we are confronted with from the moment we come into the world and join a present tense we had no influence over. From the point of conception, we are tethered to the inescapable reality of our circumstances. From the immaterial, intangible, yet ever-present laws of physics that govern our reality to the societal constructs forged by those who have come before us, the trajectory of our life is set in motion by forces we have no control over.

It is easy to operate under the false notion that the world comes into being around us as individuals. It is our brain’s default setting to think in this manner, seeing as we observe the world happening with our own two eyes, and, as such, it is only safe and reasonable to assume that we are the epicenter of the universe. This is a perfectly

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healthy mindset for a young child heavily dependent on the loving nurture of those around him and constantly on the receiving end of undivided attention.

Something changes as you mature and grow. As you gain the capacity to move through space, you gain the ability to influence your immediate surroundings. A child's smile elicits joy, laughter, and a tender embrace. This repeated action and reaction results in a learned behavior that a baby will use to reinforce the loving and caring bond between the baby and his parents. A toddler will also leverage this behavior to get out of trouble sometimes. The lesson learned at a very young age is that you, as an individual, are capable of influencing and affecting change in your environment. This is the catalyst for developing a mature mind and the beginning of the conscious recognition of agency and free will.

Agency and free will are the intangible mediums by which we can affect change. This is something every Green Beret understands. Our actions can influence a myriad of events. If actions are taken strategically and methodically, you can shape the world around you as you see fit. This knowledge may seem obvious but should be treated with the highest degree of precaution when leveraged.

Our ability to effectively and efficiently enact change is what makes us, Green Berets, force multipliers. As a singular ODA, we are trained to conduct a wide array of missions. Particularly of note is our capacity to conduct Unconventional Warfare. Through subversion, sabotage, guerrilla tactics, and psychological operations, we can set our sights on any country, destabilize the government, and help put one friendly towards American interests abroad in place. While such an undertaking

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requires a high degree of planning, fastidious attention to detail, and methodical execution, the fact remains that our actions will undoubtedly affect the target we set our focus on.

This is not a perspective on life that is strictly pertinent to the Green Beret or the tactician. This should be the mindset of any individual with aspirations and a yearning to succeed. We must understand that we are not strictly at the mercy of what transpires around us. You have the capacity to affect change as you see fit, to influence the people around you, for good or for evil. This is precisely why this understanding requires the highest degree of precaution and, perhaps more importantly, wisdom.

To effectively put this into practice, two factors must be identified: the controllables and the variables. The distinction in terms lies in the different manner in which you should approach the two. Controllables are what you can immediately affect, and variables are the factors you have little to no control over. While you cannot directly change the variables, you can absolutely influence them in some way, shape, or form. Every event of life is comprised of these two factors. How you action these will ultimately determine your outcome.

This applies to every facet of life, every endeavor, every goal, and every aspiration. More often than not, we spend much of our time focusing on the variables despite the fact that we are far less capable of affecting these. Worse yet, we often misidentify controllables as variables. This only serves to paralyze us from taking action. You are not tethered to your circumstances, surroundings, socioeconomic status, or degree of knowledge. Every single one of these has an aspect that is controllable by

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nature.

Not too far behind the importance of identifying these two factors lies the requirement that kills the majority of dreams, goals, and aspirations: discipline. Discipline is the continuous and unrelenting action you take to control your controllables in order to produce your intended result. Discipline is not dependent on the weather, your mood, or your degree of motivation. Neither my fears nor my uncertainties determine my consistency. My discipline exists despite all of that. Your variables cannot dictate your controllables. On the contrary, you should affect your controllables in a manner that influences your variables.

There is one variable and one variable only that you cannot affect. This is the one we most often take for granted. It is a variable made distinct by the fact that we can only operate within its boundaries despite its unshakable grip on all of reality. That variable is time. It is the opinion of a fool to say, "I have time." All that is, ever has been, and ever will be is subject to the transient nature of time. This in and of itself should serve as an impetus to do today that which you can. Coming face to face with your mortality will immediately disabuse you of the false notion that your time on Earth is unlimited.

In 2019, I deployed to Afghanistan during Operation Freedom's Sentinel. I had only just graduated from the Q-Course and was a recently minted Green Beret. When I reported to 1st Special Forces Group, I was assigned to ODA 1236 with deployment orders. While overseas, we often found ourselves in kinetic environments where direct contact with the enemy was common. Despite our tactical and technological superiority, the enemy also had a vote. I quickly recognized a sobering

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reality: tomorrow is never guaranteed.

This is the inevitability of life. Accept it. What you do with the time you have now, whatever decisions you make now, and the discipline you practice now are similar in their high degree of importance and their inseparable tie to the now. Yesterday is no longer. Tomorrow is not guaranteed. What you have at your disposal is your now.

Note that I did not specify any amount of action necessary to deem your day productive. Frankly, doing anything is better than doing absolutely nothing. This can easily be illustrated with elementary school math. If I do zero things today and zero things for the next 6 days, how much did I do in seven days? I did zero things. What if every day for seven days, I get 0.1% closer to accomplishing my goal? In seven days, I would achieve 0.7% of my goal. In one month, I accomplish 3% of my goal. In three years, having executed a disciplined 0.1% every single day, I would achieve 100% of my goal and then some.

Every small effort adds up. It begins with setting a goal. The next step is identifying the controllable factors and the variables at play. The key, however, is to take charge of what you can control while strategically influencing the rest. Recognizing that time is a finite and unpredictable force, it is imperative that you do not delay. Take charge and act decisively.



## CHAPTER 5

# A SYMBOL OF EXCELLENCE

“Sergeant Christian Perez.” That was my cue to walk from the back of the stage towards a line of high-ranking officers and their Sergeants Major. At the end of the line stood Lieutenant General Tovo with my green beret in his grip. I walked over to him, shook his hand with my right hand, received my beret with my left, turned towards the cameraman at the front of the stage, and waited for the camera flash.

“Thank you, sir,” I said and proceeded off the stage.

One of the proudest moments in my life was when I donned my green beret. Purchasing it only cost me \$20. There was no protective shield that it sat behind. There wasn’t even a store clerk who needed to walk it to the cash register. Its value is not determined by its monetary price. Its value is intangible and representative of years

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of hard work and effort. To put it simply, a consistent effort is what determines its value. Consistent effort is a common characteristic in those who achieve success. What you accomplish may yield a monetary reward, but the value of your effort has no price.

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy recognized the need for a soldier capable of conducting unconventional warfare in the fight against Communism. He visited Fort Bragg, NC, and witnessed the capabilities of the Army Special Forces soldier. Later, in a letter to the Army, he wrote, “The green beret is again becoming a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom.”

I am eternally humbled and honored to have served my country as a Green Beret and am proud to have found success in that capacity. The perfect formula for success, however, does not exist. What exists are choices. You have in your hands this very moment the ability to make choices that will permanently shape your life. The choices you make every day, every hour, every minute, and every second will ultimately dictate the person you become. It is imperative, however, that as you make these choices, you focus on pursuing excellence in your endeavors.

Leave no room for mediocrity in your life. Hold yourself to a higher standard and walk alongside those with a similar mindset. While there is no perfect formula for success, those who pursue excellence in everything they undertake often find it. Surround yourself with these individuals.

Put in the effort now. Don’t wait until tomorrow because tomorrow is not promised. Leverage the time you have today towards achieving your goals. Don’t wager the

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time you don't have.

I urge you to set your sights on your goals and do something today to get you closer to achieving them. From the moment you open your eyes, there should be no doubt in your mind that you will pursue excellence in everything you do. Success is waiting for you to get out of bed. Success is waiting for you to stop being comfortable. Success is waiting for you to stand up and take control of your life. But success will not wait forever. Set a goal now. Decide now. Take action now.

Les Brown, a former member of the Ohio House of Representatives, once said, “The graveyard is the richest place on earth because it is here that you will find all the hopes and dreams that were never fulfilled, the books that were never written, the songs that were never sung, the inventions that were never shared, the cures that were never discovered, all because someone was too afraid to take that first step, keep with the problem, or determined to carry out their dream.”

You have a responsibility to your fellow man to be ambitious in your goals. You have a responsibility to those around you to use your God-given talents, skills, and abilities for the betterment of society. Anything short of that is a burden on society, and you will be held accountable. The weight of your inaction will forever burden your conscience. So break away from the inherently narcissistic mindset that tells you that you have time because you don't.

“Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will put you in charge of many things...” (Matthew 25:23). Setting aside religious preferences and focusing on the underlying message, we find a universal truth: good stewardship over the little

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things inevitably results in greater and greater successes. This is a truth that has stood the test of time.

So, I offer you, the reader, one final challenge rooted in the words President John F. Kennedy used to describe the Green Beret. Today, I urge you to be a symbol of excellence to those around you, a badge of courage in the face of adversity, and a mark of distinction in the pursuit of your endeavors.

De Oppresso Liber





# A LETTER TO ELIJAH

My son,

I am eternally grateful to the Lord Almighty for the blessing of witnessing His breath of life bestowed upon you. There is no more sacred moment than when I held you in my arms and felt your head rest on my chest while your mother and I welcomed you into this world. I have loved you since you quietly slept and grew in your mother's womb. I will always love you unconditionally and without any reservations.

Despite the fact that I am a new father, I take the responsibility of raising you to be a strong, honorable, and honest man very seriously. As such, I publicly swear that as long as God grants me the breath of life, I will do everything in my power to guide you, mentor you, and be there for you to mold you into a disciplined man of principle after God's own heart. This I solemnly swear

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before the Lord Almighty and the world at large.

Son, life is a beautiful miracle filled with stunning beauty and grandiose images that inspire awe in anyone who takes the time to stop and look. The world is a place of absolute amazement and wonder, from the majesty of waves crashing in the open ocean to the brilliantly synchronized flutter of a hummingbird's wings. There is incredible beauty to be witnessed everywhere.

From before you were born, we as a society have been hard at work creating an incredible civilization that welcomes you. We have found ways to defy gravity and fly across the skies. We have cured diseases of microscopic origins. We have placed the whole of human knowledge and understanding in the palm of your hand.

The sobering reality, however, is that, as you will someday learn, humans are also deeply flawed. We have often hurt one another, practiced poor stewardship in some areas of our world, and are often ungrateful and consumed by greed. Rarely do we stop to appreciate the miracle that it is to be alive.

As beautiful as life is, it is a difficult road to traverse. I wish I could tell you that you will never suffer, that you will never cry, you will never feel the pain of loss or the heartbreak of betrayal. While I wish I could take on these burdens for you, the reality is that your actions amidst adversity, pain, and heartbreak will forge you into a man of character and resilience. The world is in dire need of men like this. You will witness evil. It is your responsibility to protect your family from it and attack it relentlessly till it is no longer.

Son, it is a bittersweet reality that my purpose is to equip you to live a fulfilling life even when I am no longer by your side. While I won't always be present to

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guide you, whisper words of encouragement, or tell you that you're okay and that I got you, I will always be in your heart.

When doubt, fear, and apprehension creep into your mind, never quit. Know that you are a man of excellence capable of achieving greatness despite the challenges you will inevitably face. Understand that nothing can stop you from fulfilling your dreams except for you. From the moment God gave you life, he gave you agency and free will. Be judicious in how you employ these.

I hope and pray that you live life to the absolute fullest. Love passionately. Laugh boisterously. Express gratitude every day because you are never guaranteed another. Always be hungry for knowledge. Never shy away for fear of rejection. Discover your passion and pursue it relentlessly. Always maintain a spirit of humility. Be just when in positions of authority. Never withhold good advice from anyone. Embrace your wife and kids at every opportunity. Love them with every fiber of your being, and lead them to the best of your abilities. But most importantly, never turn away from God.

In life, you will fail, you will be hurt, and you will experience solitude, but when you are at your lowest point and it feels like the world is collapsing around you, look to God for hope and guidance.

My love for you will forever transcend space and time.

Sincerely,  
Dad



# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

*It is only due to God's love and mercy that I have the opportunity to share my thoughts with you, the reader. I owe my life and every blessing I have to Him.*

*To my incredible, beautiful, and brilliant wife. Thank you for your love, support, and sacrifice.*

*To my mother and father. Thank you for your dedication to raising a man I hope you're proud of.*

*To the men of ODA 1236. I could not be more blessed than to have had the opportunity to serve alongside all of you. Thank you for the wisdom and knowledge each and every one of you shared with me.*

*Finally, to Dave "Fish" Troutman. Thank you for being the exemplary Senior every FNG would be lucky to have. Till I see you again, brother.*



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Christian Perez was an Army Special Forces Medical Sergeant assigned to 1st Special Forces Group at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. In 2019, he deployed to Afghanistan as a member of SFOD-A 1236 during Operation Freedom's Sentinel. For his exceptionally meritorious service, he was awarded the Bronze Star Medal.

In addition to his dedicated military service, Christian wholeheartedly embraces the role of a mentor, empowering young men to discover their strengths and navigate challenges with confidence and resilience.