

Operation Dark Heart

Spycraft and Special Operations on the
Frontlines of Afghanistan

Lt. Col. Anthony Shaffer



Mainstream Publishing *eBooks*



On Friday, August 13, 2010, just as St. Martin's Press was readying its initial shipments of this book to be released from our warehouse, the Department of Defense contacted us to express its concern that our publication of *Operation Dark Heart* could cause damage to U.S. national security. This was unexpected, since we knew the author, Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Shaffer, had worked closely with the Department of the Army, and had made a number of changes to the text, after which it passed the Army's operational security review. However, the Department of Defense, and the Defense Intelligence Agency in particular, insisted that the Army's review was insufficient. Thereafter, Lieutenant Colonel Shaffer met with the Department of Defense, the Defense Intelligence Agency and other interested U.S. intelligence agencies to review changes and redactions that they demanded he make to his book. Because Lieutenant Colonel Shaffer is a security professional himself, with some twenty-five years experience, we were confident then, and remain confident now, that he had not revealed anything in his book that could damage our national security, harm our troops, or harm U.S. military intelligence efforts or assets. However, based on the discussions our author had with the government he requested that we incorporate some of the government's changes into a revised edition of his book while redacting other text he was told was classified, though he disagreed with that assessment.

Because we support our author fully, we honored his request that we make those changes and redactions. The text that follows is the result of the extraordinary review of Lieutenant Colonel Shaffer's book by the Department of Defense, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and other U.S. intelligence agencies. We apologize for any frustration readers may encounter in reading *Operation Dark Heart* in this redacted form, but we are confident Lieutenant Colonel Shaffer's remarkable and vivid story will shine through nonetheless.

—Thomas Dunne

New York, September 8, 2010

OPERATION DARK HEART

SPYCRAFT AND SPECIAL OPS ON THE FRONTLINES OF AFGHANISTAN—AND THE PATH
TO VICTORY

Lt. Col. Anthony Shaffer



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To my great-uncle, Joseph “Tony” Fernandez, who served in World War II, and dedicated his life to helping the family. If not for him, I would not have been able to do the things I’ve done. He died never knowing that I was an intelligence officer.

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How to Win in Afghanistan

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First—my colleagues and friends with whom I served in combat: Thanks to Col. (Ret.) Juan Negro, former director of the Leadership Targeting Cell, Bagram, Afghanistan; Commander (Ret.) David Christenson, Senior Naval Intelligence Officer; and Mr. John Hays, National Geospatial Intelligence Activity imagery analyst and all around brave guy; all contributed to this effort directly and it would not have been possible without them. This book would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my colleagues who served with me in combat and in the real-world battles of trying to beat the bureaucracy and win the war.

Thanks to my FBI colleagues who served with me in Afghanistan—“M” and “D”—while I cannot mention your names, you both were outstanding officers in every way. I am proud to have served with you and would serve with you again, anytime, anywhere. So much for a “benign environment,” to debrief a terrorist, eh?

Next—to three leaders who did more to help this country than anyone will ever know: For all the “prep” to push me forward, thanks to Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Pat Hughes, U.S. Army; Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Bob Harding, U.S. Army; and Col. (Ret.) Gerry York, U.S. Army, who all provided me guidance and mentoring, and allowed me the extraordinary privilege of being allowed to run real operations with freedom, resources (most of the time), and the opportunity to work for, and learn from, men of intellectual courage and character.

Thanks to my fellow “Jedi Knight”—Sean, who is even now out on the battlefield fighting the forces of darkness, and that darkness is all too often not al Qaeda, but our own bloated bureaucracy of meandering nabobs of criticism and ignorance. God bless ya, brother!

Thanks to Col. David Strickland, USAR, Assistant Division Commander, 94th Division, for being smarter and wiser than most colonels in the army today—and my gratitude to him for helping make this book possible.

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Last but not least, my thanks to Col. (Ret.) John Tempone, USMC, who is himself portrayed in another book, *Cook, Baker, Candlestick Maker* for his heroic exploits in Lebanon, who was also my class leader at “the Farm.” He encouraged me to endure, to never give up or accept mediocrity or defeat, and to always, no matter what, do “the next right thing.” Semper Fi!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is based on my recollections, and the recollections of other members of the Leadership Targeting Cell in Afghanistan, who graciously agreed to collaborate with me in this effort. I also drew on a journal that I kept at the time. While memory is never 100 percent accurate, I've done my best, with the help of others, to tell the story truthfully.

Names have been changed in a number of cases. Some people are still undercover, while others, for any number of reasons, chose not to have their real name published.

The views expressed in my writing do not necessarily represent the views of the U. S. Army or the United States.

GLOSSARY

ACM—Anti-Coalition Militia

ADVON—Advanced Operations

AFB—Air Force Base

AFG—Air Force Group

AFSAC—Air Force Special Activities Center

AMF—Afghan Militia Forces

ANA—Afghan National Army

BCP—Bagram Collection Point

BDU—battle-dress uniform

CENTCOM—U.S. Central Command

CH-47—Chinook heavy-lift helicopter

CJSOTF—Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force

CJTF—Combined Joint Task Force

CONOP—Concept of Operations

CSAR—Combat Search and Rescue

DCI—Director of the Central Intelligence Agency

DCU—desert camouflage uniform

DIA—Defense Intelligence Agency

DOCEX—Document Exploitation

EBO—Effects Based operation

Farm—CIA training Facility

FLIR—Thermal imaging, forward looking infrared camera

FOB—Forward Operating Base

FRAGO—fragmentary order

G2—army director of intelligence

HESCO—a modern gabion made of wire mesh containers lined with heavy fabric and filled with dirt and rocks.

HIG—Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin—terrorist group founded by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

HOC—HUMINT Operations Center

HQ—Headquarters

HSD—HUMINT Support Detachment

HSE—HUMINT Support Element

HUMINT—Human Intelligence

HVT—High Value Target

ID—identification; identify

IG—Inspector General

INSCOM—Army Intelligence and Security Command

ISAF—International Security Assistance Force
ISI—Pakistani Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence
J2—senior intelligence officer, joint staff
J3—director for operations, joint staff
JDAMs—Joint direct attack munition
JSOC—Joint Special Operations Command
JSOTF—Joint Special Operations Task Force
JSTAR—airborne surveillance and target attack radar system
LIWA—Army’s Land Information Warfare Activity
LTC—Leadership Targeting Cell
LZ—Landing Zone
MIDB—Military Intelligence Database
MP—military police
MRE—meal ready to eat
NCO—noncommissioned officer
NFN—National File Number
NIMA—National Imagery and Mapping Agency
NSA—National Security Agency
NVGs—Night-Vision Goggles
OIC—Officer in Charge
ROE—Rules of Engagement
RPG—rocket-propelled grenade
SA-7—Soviet-made SAM (surface to air missile) a.k.a. GRAIL or Strela-2
SAW—Squad Automatic Weapon
SCIF—Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility
SF—Special Forces
[REDACTED]
SOCOM—U.S. Special Operations Command
[REDACTED]
TOC—Tactical Operations Center
[REDACTED]
VTC—video teleconferencing center in SCIF

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

“War is for the participants a test of character: it makes bad men worse and good men better.” —JOSHUA LAWRENCE CHAMBERLAIN

IT’S damned hard to sleep with your head propped up on the butt end of an M-4.

After your body is soaked by months of exhaustion, however, sleep comes fast—even when you’re aboard an MH-47 Chinook chopper, subfreezing wind blowing through, as it thumps through the thin air of the Afghan mountains headed for trouble.

First stop: a rendezvous with my team of operators in the field, who were going to be thoroughly pissed off with the orders I was bringing them for our new mission. Second stop: An assault with the U.S. Rangers on a northern Afghan village that the CIA claimed housed senior al Qaeda leadership.

I was jostled awake when the 47’s momentum shifted as it turned right to follow the valley. Out of the right-side gunner position, I caught a glimpse of a tall, rugged, gray mountain towering over the aircraft, silhouetted by the mid-November full moon. Christ. We were at 10,000 feet, and these mountains go up another 3,000 feet easy. *No wonder the Muj could take Russian choppers down in the area during the occupation.* We were sitting ducks to any shepherd with a Red Rider BB gun and careful aim.

The MH-47s are giant copters used for Special Operations. I was flying on the 47 CSAR bird—Combat Search and Rescue—the medical and recovery chopper. I’d only had thirty minutes to prepare for this ride. No time to get on any combat gear. It had been come as you are: long-sleeved T-shirt, khaki pants, leather boots, black fleece jacket, and my thirteen-round M-11 handgun. I’d just been able to grab my M-4 out from under my cot, along with my gray ammo vest that contained six magazines and my body armor—but no helmet. So I’d kept on my Operation Enduring Freedom baseball cap. It did have a nice American flag on it.

Whole lotta help it would be if we got stuck in a firefight.

The crew chief had given me the only seat they had—a standard folding chair that you’d find in a church or school auditorium. Looking at the fresh-faced crew from my chair, I suddenly felt my age. At forty-one, I was old enough to be these guys’ dad.

Here I was in Afghanistan,

My job: to run the Defense Intelligence Agency’s operations out of [REDACTED] the hub for U.S. operations in country. It was late October 2003, and I had arrived in early July for what ultimately, after extensions, would be six months of duty.

It was to be the longest, strangest period of my life when, despite the best efforts of myself, my team, and some of my commanding officers, the United States squandered the momentum it had after defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks. Official timidity, bureaucratic

foot-dragging, overanalysis—I saw it leading up to the September 11 attacks, I saw it in Afghanistan while I served there, and I still see it today.

We were headed to a staging area set up in the mountains by the Ranger assault team. There we were to pick up 10th Mountain troops, who were going to join with the Rangers in sweeping through a village near Asadabad that the CIA guys had assured them held Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's lieutenants. Hekmatyar was one of the key warlords who'd left the back door open to let bin Laden escape Tora Bora. The plan was for me to rendezvous with my team at the staging area. They were in the area guiding the Rangers to the high-value targets, using Afghan spies or, as we called them, assets.

It was a hot landing zone (LZ), the Rangers had warned. They'd observed random gunfire, and a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) had been fired at the troops earlier that day. Accompanying the Ranger assault team on this flight meant that I would also be along for their assault on the village that supposedly held the bad guys.

The new orders, handwritten by the Ranger G2—the military intelligence officer—were neatly folded and sitting in the warmth of my black fleece jacket.

My team was gonna take to it like an eight-year-old to asparagus. We'd recruited a scout to help smooth our way with the villagers, but the CIA had maneuvered him out of the picture. Now we were going to be on our own without a native guide.

Freakin' CIA.

With a slight shudder, our chopper moved forward in formation with four other MH-47s, accompanied by five Black Hawk attack helicopters, toward the northeastern mountains of Afghanistan. In the bright moonlight, I could clearly see the desert terrain, a cool, pale, whitish blue. Following the curves and bumps of the terrain—the “nap of the earth”—we passed over it at 150 knots per hour. The two gunners' doors were open, and the icy nighttime air swirled in. I was cold—as cold as I ever remember being in my life.

About fifteen minutes into the flight, the door gunners test fired their Gatling-style miniguns, and jumped when the loud *rip* of the burst let loose. I could see the tracers arcing down toward the desert floor, and hear the sister helicopters follow suit and test theirs.

As the crow flies, the distance from Bagram Air Base (the U.S. base 40 miles north of Kabul) to the staging area was only about an hour and a half, but the route this night was in and out of numerous valleys. I felt a push on my shoulders as the helicopter pulled up to clear a ridgeline, then, quickly, my stomach rose toward my throat as it nosed back down. The cycle was repeated over and over for the next three hours.

As we approached the LZ, the crew chief stood in the center of the helicopter and held up his hands, fingers spread.

Ten minutes out.

Shortly after that, one hand. Five minutes away.

Two fingers. We were about to arrive.

As we slowed, I could make out the tiered, plowed fields, like pancakes stacked slightly offset from each other.

The crew chief caught me as I stood up to walk out. “Sir—don't forget—ten minutes. We can't stay,” he yelled into my ear.

“Got it,” I yelled back.

As the MH-47 landed and the rear ramp was lowered, I put my rifle on semiauto and moved out to two o'clock from the bird while half the team went out to establish security around the helo. At first,

the exhaust from the two jet motors of the 47 washed over me like a tropical breeze. The heat was a welcome surprise.

I was next to an irrigation ditch that, I quickly found out after putting my foot into it, was full of cold water. I moved out of the ditch and went down on one knee. The noise from the bird was thunderous. I had ten minutes to meet with my guys, give them their new mission, and pass along the gear while the 10th Mountain guys loaded into the empty Chinooks. More than ten minutes, and the CSAR would take off without me and I would be left here with no winter gear, no additional weaponry, no extra ammo.

Feeling the cold ground on my knee through my pants, I watched the horizon for either the silhouette of an enemy troop moving forward with an AK-47 or one of our officers approaching me to make contact.

I flashed my blue signal light in one-second bursts, every 45 degrees into the darkness until I'd covered a full 360 degrees to ID my position to our guys. I moved a few meters from the spot where I'd shown the light just in case the bad guys had decided to take a potshot. I waited a few seconds, showed the light again, and moved once more. Because of the noise of the helicopters, short of bullet hitting the ground near me or slamming (hopefully) into the ceramic plate of my body armor, I wouldn't have known if I was being shot at.

Soon I saw the dark outlines of the 10th Mountain soldiers loading onto the other Chinooks.

One of my team showed up—it was Mr. White, the forward officer in charge. It was then that I heard the faint sound of gunfire and a sound like a fast-flying bug not far above my head.

We stooped and ran toward a mud hut about 200 meters away so we'd have some cover from the gunfire. I wasn't used to the altitude, and I gasped in the thin air. I was in good shape, but the 50 pounds in body armor and ammo weighed me down, and I struggled the last 100 meters. It felt like my lungs had shut down.

Now that I was away from the copter, the full-on cold mountain air hit my face. I heard the faint, harsh cough of the Kalashnikovs.

The other members of my team were at the hut, and we squatted in a loose circle. They'd been out for several days in the high mountains, and they were bleary-eyed. They looked like crap.

For operational security when we spoke on phones, we had selected color-coded nicknames. I was Mr. Gray.

Just to my back, I heard the increase of the torque on the rotors of the helicopters. One by one, the noisy beasts lumbered off the LZ and into the air. Only the CSAR remained behind for me.

The clock was ticking.

"Gentlemen—I've got the new mission with me," I said, handing over the cash. Mr. Red and Mr. Pink rifled through it. The guys glanced at each other and leaned toward me.

"Tony, we want to come out—all of us—now," said Mr. White. "There's nothing we can do here or use. You know we don't have access to our other guys who could give us intel on [REDACTED]. We've lost our source and we don't have any way to contact our other assets."

"That's not going to happen," I told him.

[REDACTED]

I ran them through the details of the new assignment. They weren't happy.

Mr. Blue, our native [REDACTED] started, "This won't work. Without our guys we're limited in our ability to guide our guys through these villages.

[REDACTED]

"I agree," I said, "but Keller is determined that you all remain with the Rangers. Part of this is

political.”

~~“Tony this is shit,” said Mr. Pink. His eyes glowed with anger in the moonlight. “It makes no sense.”~~

The gunfire was getting closer as our voices rose.

This is insane, I thought. We’re in the middle of a field being shot at. We might as well have just painted targets on our asses.

“Sonsabitches . . .” one of the guys muttered to no one in particular.

Behind us was another crack of an AK-47.

Two minutes left. I had to convince these guys to accept the mission and then get my ass back on the chopper.

“Look, this is the deal.” I spoke rapidly. “I agree. This is a waste. We need to get you guys out. Just help me justify your reassignment.”

“The SEALs are going into the valleys 10 klicks from here later this week,” Mr. Blue said. His voice was urgent. The gunfire was coming more rapidly. “Our teams can do the recon and prep them for their mission,” he added.

“What is their target?” I asked, glancing over at the lone Chinook. It was starting to take fire, but the crew didn’t return fire. They couldn’t be sure where we were.

“One of the HIG’s suspected safe havens. They’ve got good intel to get one of his lieutenants.” He was referring to Hekmatyar’s group.

“Got it,” I said. “I give you my word I’ll have you all out of here by tomorrow afternoon.”

Or so I hoped. I figured with this information and a logical argument, I could overcome the political

████████████████████

“Look, gentlemen, this is not my choice.” I handed Mr. Pink the written instructions. “This is what we’ve been told to do.”

One minute left, and I needed 30 seconds to make the run to the bird.

“I’ll take one of you with me. You can come back and make the case to Keller and McChrystal. But the rest of you stay.”

Mr. White was the man. He gave final instructions to Mr. Pink, and we were off, with me in the lead, running across the field. Hunched over, my ammunition vest slamming against my chest, I fought to catch a breath.

The options weren’t good. Run or take the chance of getting aired out by a sniper.

By the time we hit the chopper, the rotors were screaming and the ramp was just barely kissing the ground. The crew wanted to get the hell out of there. Bullet holes spattered the hull, but the fire hadn’t made it past the Kevlar lining within the airframe.

Even before we threw ourselves on the floor, I heard the whine of the motors increase, and the push on my shoulders as the copter lifted off.

Next stop was the assault. The 10th Mountain troops were going to set up blocking positions in and around the target village, and the Rangers would do the actual assault. The plan called for the CSAR to land to the south of the village, to stay out of firing range, and for the crew to move in on foot if a fight broke out and there were casualties. I’d stand by. Black Hawks would be overhead to protect us. Seemed simple.

Like hell.

THE “DARK SIDE”

I always wanted to be a spook. “Black ops”—the most top-secret class of clandestine operations—became my specialty for sixteen of my twenty-five years as an intelligence officer.

I was part of the “dark side of the force”—the shadowy elements of the Department of Defense and the rest of the U.S. government that function outside the bounds of the normal system. Our job was to protect the country through subterfuge and deception. Hide the truth to get the truth, as we say.

It is effective, seductive—and dangerous to those who are a part of it. It is easy to exploit our methods and abilities to advance our own personal interests rather than use them for the greater good of the country. I have seen men lie, cheat, and manipulate others simply to advance their careers.

Looking back on my upbringing, I guess you could say it would have been easy for me to slip over onto that path.

I never knew my real dad. He left my mom before I was born and, while it may sound strange, I’ve never been curious as to who my dad was or what motivated him to not know me. I’m grateful just to be here.

After I was born, for the first seven years of my life, I spent a great deal of time with my relatives in Kansas—in a small town named Cherryvale. It was a simple and wonderful existence for a child.

My mom eventually married an Air Force captain and we moved to Wichita, Kansas. I was not happy about being pulled out of my comfortable life in a sleepy hamlet and I started to rebel.

I tended to stir up trouble everywhere I went, learning early how to survive and find my own path and—always—push the envelope.

On Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines in the 1970s, I bought World War II hand grenades—the explosives were mostly hollowed out—and old Japanese helmets from kids outside the fence. The Explosive Ordnance Disposal folks came out and confiscated the grenades. By the age of fourteen, when we were living in Lisbon, Portugal, I was bartending in the marine house for the embassy marine guard. I was drinking as much as I was serving. I went to the American international school, and on Friday evenings we’d go to the Bacaso bar in Cascais to have five shots—each—of Bagaso (Portuguese white lightning) with a beer chaser. Then we’d run two miles on the boardwalk to Estoril to go to a movie there, and whoever didn’t throw up on the way got his movie paid for by the rest of the group.

Our school administrator called me the “happy-go-lucky rebel,” and I lived up to the name.

Once, I found a key to the school chemistry lab and asked our chemistry teacher what was the most corrosive acid that could be made. He told me it was a combination of hydrochloric acid and sulfuric acid. So, during gym class when no one was around, I ducked into the chemistry lab and tried to mix them up. They blew up. Highly toxic plumes of smoke came from the beaker. I poured the brew out. It ate through solid concrete. Fortunately, I had the brains to get the hell out of there before it killed me.

Maybe, if I was really smart, I wouldn't have tried the experiment the first time. Maybe.

I actually got the entire high school drunk when I was a sophomore. The school was getting a tour of the Lancer's wine factory just outside Lisbon, and I talked a teacher into letting us buy wine to "take home to our parents." We all bought two bottles for \$1 each and learned the art of punching corks in. Hank Sanders got so sick he threw up in the headmaster's car. Every kid's parents were called except mine. The next day, the headmaster called me in and asked me if I was responsible for what had happened. I was straight about it. "I gotta tell you, sir, I was." He never called my parents. He appreciated that I didn't lie, I guess, and I learned that telling the truth isn't that bad. It's a lesson I've applied many times in my life when something I did ran me into trouble.

I still have my high school yearbook. He wrote, "You have mucho talento. Use it wisely." I tried to keep that in mind, but I haven't always been successful.

I may have been the happy-go-lucky rebel, but I was painfully shy around girls. Underneath the bravado, I was drinking because I thought it would make me feel more cool with them—but it didn't. So I drank more. I just didn't know what to say to women or how to act around them. I guess that's the reason I remained a virgin until I was twenty.

I had always wanted to become a spy—I just didn't know what that meant until I got to high school. In Lisbon, the American community was small, so everyone knew who the intelligence people were. I was periodically debriefed by the embassy attaché about the international students at school—what they were doing and saying. That's how I really became interested in the spy world. I saw all these games going on. Also, I wanted to help people. This may be the logic of a sixteen-year-old, but I figured a really good intelligence officer could save more lives than a doctor. If you were able to get information that could enable your side to save thousands of people, well, that was better than medicine.

I started at the bottom. When my family had moved to Ohio during my senior year in high school, I enlisted in the National Guard as a telecommunications center operator—basically a teletype operator for the army. I did my basic training at Fort Gordon, Georgia, where I was a super straight arrow—no drinking, no nothin'. I got several letters of commendation there and worked my way up to assistant platoon sergeant.

During my first year in the Guard, while I was a freshman at Wright State College, I started working with the recruiters who had recruited me. For every individual I recruited, I got an extra \$25 (which in 1981 dollars wasn't bad), and I managed to land more than one hundred people. I also became public affairs director for the local Guard. Those activities got me inducted into the Ohio Army National Guard Recruiter Hall of Fame. Actually, I've never seen the Recruiter Hall of Fame and have no idea if it actually exists, but I have a plaque that says I'm in it.

Because of my work there, the commander of my unit—Col. Chuck Conner—told me that if I wanted to go into Officer Candidate School, he would give me any job in the command when I got back. I said I wanted the counterintelligence position he had open. He looked at me like I was crazy.

"I have an aviation slot I've kept open for you. You could become a pilot," he said.

I said, no, I appreciated that, but that I wanted to become an intelligence officer. It was a special agent billet and, technically, you had to be twenty-one to do it. I was only going to be nineteen when I graduated, but I got it anyway—Chuck had that much confidence in me.

While at Wright State, I took time off to get all the training to become an intelligence officer. My basic intelligence officer training was conducted at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, where I was the youngest person in my class. I resumed my mantle as the heavy-drinking, happy-go-lucky rebel. On Friday afternoons, three of my friends and I would hop in a car and drive the 100 miles to Tucson, drinking

fifth—or two—of vodka along the way.

Soon, I was working counterterrorism missions in the United States and Europe while still in the army reserves and having the time of my life. This was the height of the Cold War, and the military's entire DNA was built around opposing the Russians. I got involved in Return of Forces in Germany (REFORGER), which tested the military's ability to rapidly move massive amounts of troops and equipment over to Germany in case the Russians invaded. I started doing counterterrorism work on the ground there—what we call low-level source operations. These are cases where you go into a community undercover and set up nets of agents in local villages. I'd go talk to the burgermeister. I'd go into bars and restaurants and recruit. I'd ask people to call me if anything happens. Lotsa free beer there, too.

I loved that kind of work (not just the free beer). In the United States, I did an operational security survey of West Point in '85 to see how a terrorist might attack a target, and I was acting special agent in charge of the New York City Resident Office when we thought that Libya would attack the Statue of Liberty during its grand reopening in '86.

People were impressed with my efforts. I was invited into a course called Key Personnel Program that looks for talent in the reserves to bring into the army.

My drinking hadn't abated, though. I was guzzling booze like a freakin' fish. I thought my generation would die in a conflagration in Europe when the Russians swept through, so I figured I would be dead by the time I was twenty-nine. I lived life like that; it justified being wild. My motto was "live fast, die young, and wear clean underwear—or none at all."

Looking back on it, I don't know how I survived. I started having blackouts: I would start drinking in one place, wake up in another place, and not know how I got there. The "good" Tony, who was working hard and earning commendations and promotions, was starting to get further and further away from the "bad" Tony, who got drunk and said and did stupid things. I drank everything: pitchers of beer, Jack Daniel's with Heineken, Foster's Lager. I went through my white Zinfandel days, drinking a bottle a day. I kept a bottle of vodka in the freezer for times when nothing else was around. So far, at least, it didn't affect my job. In fact, some of my bosses drank as much as I did.

As I moved further into intelligence work, I recognized that a higher level of intelligence collection was being a spook—going undercover. There, I would be working to penetrate foreign governments, as well as terrorist groups, drug cartels, and other criminal organizations. I would identify, assess, and recruit foreign intelligence "assets" (the military's term for foreign informants who work full time for the U.S. government doing espionage work). As well, I would work in intelligence "technical collection"—that is, surveillance technology.

In all, these are the most protected programs in the U.S. government. It could be dangerous work—on many operations, I would need to hide my identity, my organization's identity, and many aspects of my background.

Moving to Washington, D.C., in November '87, I joined the

I went through training at the "Farm" —the six-month CIA course that turns you into an operative—and finished at the top of my class. While in Richmond, Virginia, doing surveillance training, we convinced the hotel staff that we were the advance team scouting locations for the TV show *Miami Vice*. One of my classmates was the producer, another came in as the lawyer. One was Don Johnson's driver's stunt double. People believed us—often because they *wanted* to believe us. We were also damned convincing.

Aside from those shenanigans, mentally and emotionally, it turned out to be the toughest

[REDACTED] I've ever spent. Right before you enter, the instructors call you into a room and tell you that if you want to quit now, this is your last chance because, after this, you will never look at people the same way again.

It was true. They teach you to detect, evaluate, and categorize the darkest components of human nature and manipulate them for the purposes of good—for intelligence collection. They teach you how to not only screw with people's minds, but also how to manipulate them so they will do things that are clearly dangerous for them and dangerous for their families.

I gotta tell you, when I got out and began using those skills, I found out they worked. I call them the Dark Arts. A group of us who were there at the time called ourselves the Jedi Knights—we still do. We tried to use the Dark Arts we had learned for the right reasons and vowed not to use our skills against our friends, families, or colleagues. Yeah, it sounds corny, but we recognized the danger of allowing those skills to go unchecked. Yet I know that a lot of other people spent their entire careers engaged in office politics, using their skills to better themselves to get to higher positions.

I came out with strong ratings, but I was so drunk at graduation I didn't even know who the graduation speaker was. It turned out to be Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, who went on to command the coalition forces in the Gulf War of 1991.

I was young, and I was brash. I was the youngest person in my Officer Candidate School class in 1982, and I was also the youngest in my class at the Farm in 1988.

After the Farm, I worked for the air force [REDACTED] a civilian.

[REDACTED]

At the same time, I also served in the U.S. Army Reserve. (While I was a civilian senior intelligence officer, we all had to maintain dual status as uniformed reservists—so we could go into combat if needed.) As one of my army reserve assignments, I went down to Alabama, assigned to a team with the FBI to monitor the Soviets who wanted to defect when they came here during negotiations to eliminate the Pershing missiles as part of the INF treaty in '89.

Since I was now an undercover agent, I could not be exposed to foreign nationals. As it happened, [REDACTED] staying in the same hotel as the Soviets. There I was, helping out the stunt crew, drinking at the hotel bar, and keeping my ear to the ground, looking for Soviets who wanted to make a run for it.

Over the years, I did a lot of top-secret operations where I can reveal only a few details—the blackest of black. Counterterrorism, counterdrug, supersecret high-tech penetration of foreign nations. Some of my operations were so clandestine that I was only allowed to brief agency leadership verbally about them. They were too clandestine to be put into a memo or a database. No paper trail.

[REDACTED]

At one point, there were only eleven people in the Department of Defense who knew about it.

Other operations I handled myself by going undercover.

[REDACTED]

In another operation,

[REDACTED]

Whatever they wanted, we got for them, but we were actually selling them stuff that we could use to spy on them—and it worked. We were able to penetrate a rogue nuclear-power country to the top leadership level.

All this time, though, I was drinking heavily. There were problems with my behavior, but not enough to revoke my security clearance. In fact, I was promoted. I moved from the air force to the army full time and, in the fall of '91,

I hit bottom with my drinking in '92. It's a long story, but suffice it to say, I was living with one woman and sleeping with a colonel's secretary. Things got ugly—but they also got me sober, and I've stayed sober ever since. I got married and, in 1994, we had a son, Alexander.

in '95 when the Defense Intelligence Agency took over all clandestine human intelligence-collection assignments from the General Defense Intelligence Program. That resulted in the transfer of thousands of intelligence civilian billets to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA)—including the army human intelligence program that I headed.

It was a “hostile takeover,” as it was described at the time, and I was one of the ones who was pretty vocal about it being a bad idea. The DIA is at heart an analytical organization, and its intellectual/academia-rooted culture was never comfortable with the set of skills unique to operational intelligence on the battlefield. Those skills were radically different from those required to either count Soviet missiles or for military attachés to function in their duties in embassies in urban settings under peacetime conditions. Those of us who came in as part of the takeover were not liked. We were seen as dangerous men—knuckle draggers who shouldn't be in the intellectual mecca that was the DIA.

Guys like me who came out of the army, who understood the army and who were trained to lie, cheat, and steal for Uncle Sam, were the least popular within DIA. Its leaders didn't like clandestine HUMINT—and tactical HUMINT missions they liked even less.

All too often, the most important operations, in my view, were viewed by career bureaucrats as too dangerous for their careers—or dead ends, since you could be tied to them permanently with no potential to become a senior executive. I had no such fear. Often, I took on operations that nobody else wanted.

I took risks, but I subscribed to the philosophy that all army officers learned when they went through basic training. We were taught to take “reasonable risks.” You didn't play it safe. You played it so you could win, and that meant taking some gambles. Now, you didn't take stupid risks and you didn't do stupid things, but you understood the situation, and you tried to calculate what would get you what you needed to achieve success.

Some people loved me, some people hated me. It's still that way. There was really no middle ground. Some people liked the fact that I could go in and find a way to get things done in very complex situations. Some people didn't. The truth was, I only did what I was permitted to do relating to the operation objectives that were approved at the highest level.

We knew they contained significant information on individuals being trained in the terrorism camps—and, more importantly, their potential targets. My unit's mission, within the context of a much larger operation known as Able Danger,

We were making progress—and had a pathway in—when things were shut down; a decision that was terribly flawed in retrospect.

Nevertheless, we faced constant resistance from the risk-averse DIA bureaucracy. My immediate

bosses, who were nervous about these operations, sat on requests for equipment and travel and held up funding, despite the high-level support they were getting. I constantly had to fight to go around them.

At first, the unit did well—as did I—under DIA Director of Operations Maj. Gen. Robert (Bob) Harding and DIA Director Lt. Gen. Pat Hughes, who allowed me and my team to take “out of the box” ideas, and develop them into real intelligence operations. Their encouragement allowed for entrepreneurial concepts to develop. Although when General Harding left, his replacement, Maj. Gen. Rod Isler, seemed far more scared of risk. In fact, he opposed every sensitive operation that my unit, Stratus Ivy, was conducting. I battled constantly with bureaucrats like General Isler—at the same time winning awards for effectiveness. A commander once told me, “If you weren’t the best damned intelligence officer, I’d fire you.”

For example, in May 2001, I had to fight attempts by my boss at the time, Colonel Susan Cane, to get me removed as chief of Stratus Ivy and transferred to the Latin American desk after I asked her if she could get Able Danger going again.

A lot of folks at DIA felt that Tony Shaffer thought he could do whatever the hell he wanted. He was off the reservation. They never understood that I was doing things that were so secret that only a few knew about them. I was working in support of the most secret black operations run by DoD. They were operations that the most senior DIA leaders had no knowledge of. So, in the absence of direct knowledge, my co-workers’ fertile minds filled with their own mythology about me.

After September 11, I was disgusted with the whole intelligence program. I believed—and still believe—that we had it within our means to prevent the 9/11 attacks. I volunteered for active duty and was assigned a position on DIA’s Operating Base Alpha, soon taking over as commander.

We knew that some of the terrorists would be headed toward Africa—Somalia, Liberia, and other countries south of Egypt. The operation, which I supervised, was the first DIA covert action of the post-Cold War era, where my officers used an African national military proxy to hunt down and kill Qaeda terrorists.

I became an intelligence planner for the DIA team that was planning the agency’s support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

They would catch the Iraqis off guard by sending in a small contingent via helicopter to capture these sites. Great idea. Well executed.

Still, it yielded nothing. As we now know, no WMD were ever found.

I saw the Bush administration lunacy up close and personal. At one point, Col. John Sadler, executive officer to DIA deputy HUMINT director Bill Huntington, announced to the intelligence planners in a meeting that we had to start planning to put a defense attaché in the American Embassy in Baghdad since it would be open in a month.

Regardless of the fact that the invasion hadn’t even happened yet.

We asked him to clarify his comment. Sadler glared at me (he was no Tony Shaffer fan) and said the Bush administration had information that divisions of Iraqi soldiers would surrender the moment hostilities started and that the U.S. armed forces would be “met with children throwing flowers at the feet of our soldiers.”

I don’t know about anybody else, but I never saw any friggin’ flowers. Just a lot of grenades.

After only eighteen months, in early July 2003, I was forced to shut down Operating Base Alpha so that its resources could be used for the Iraq invasion. I was asked to take an overseas tour, so I volunteered to deploy to Afghanistan, where I figured the real war was being fought.

Just before my scheduled departure date, I took some leave and went down to Goshen Scout Reservation in southwestern Virginia as a parent assistant with my son Alexander, who would be spending two weeks at camp there with his Webelo troop.

This was a big transition for Alexander, a wonderful, hazel-eyed, nine-year-old, sandy brown-haired kid with a frame that was developing toward that of a football player. His mom, Karen, and I had gotten divorced back in 2001, and he had come through the transition fairly well. Karen and I were able to be adults about the whole thing—no lawyers. She and I decided to work things out with an eye on what was best for Alexander, and so it was as amicable a divorce as you could expect. Low on drama, high on cooperation.

Alexander had recently been promoted from Cub Scout to Webelo, and this was his first time at a camp—anywhere, really, by himself. I would be with him for three days, but then I had to leave for Afghanistan. I would be gone when he got home from camp.

The timing could not have been worse; he was not happy about my deployment, and no matter how much I assured him about how safe I'd be, he never seemed to believe me.

There were about five other parents along with me who were assistants to the troop, and we would go around doing the daily activities with the kids. Fun stuff: archery, pellet gun marksmanship, canoeing, rope tying, etc. Great character-building stuff . . . but the nights were going to be rough. I knew it just from Alexander's reaction the first two nights when he went off to his tent for bed.

The last night that I was at Goshen came. The kids knew I was an army guy so I took them on a night time patrol around the area and taught them some basic movement tactics. They ate it up and had a great time.

We all sat round the campfire that evening—Alex never left my side—and I knew it was time to talk.

I asked him to come sit with me on the hillside facing the north, away from the campfire glare; in an area where you could see the black sky and the bright stars very clearly.

He picked up a Capri Sun juice box from the cooler near the fire, walked with me to the overlook, and sat down beside me.

The air was still warm from the summer heat of the July day. The breeze didn't refresh, but it still felt good. I looked up into the sky and tried to contemplate what I could say to make the fear less and the pain go away. It was going to be tough.

I looked over at him and could only, barely, make out his silhouette and the slight sliver of the Mylar juice box he had close to his lips.

"Are you going to be OK?" I asked.

"No, Dad, I want to go back with you."

"Alex . . . you can't. I'm sorry. You have to stay."

"I don't want to . . . I want to be home with you."

I took a breath. I could tell by his voice that the tears were starting to well up.

"I'm not going to be home. I leave Monday for Afghanistan. So you need to help me. . . ."

His head turned to face me, and I could make out the flicker in his eyes from the ambient starlight.

"Help you—how?"

"Look, I need you to help your mom."

There was silence I interpreted as contemplation.

"How can I help by staying here?" he asked. Good question . . . I needed to think fast.

"You can show her you are growing up." I paused. "And, Alex, you are. I've been watching you. You are doing well here and having fun. You need to stay."

I got the sense that Alex was starting to understand that his role in life was changing—becoming bigger—and that was what I wanted.

“Will you be able to write me while you are gone?” he asked.

“Yep, I’m told that I will also be able to e-mail you often.” I just left off the part, for now, that I’d be using the name Tony in my notes . . . did not want to add more stress at this point.

“And I can write back?” he asked with a bit more spirit in his tone.

“Yes.”

I could sense he wanted to say something more and then, all of a sudden, the winds started to blow. First at the treetops and, quickly, down to ground level. I sat and looked up. The sky was still clear. What the heck was going on?

The wind had now become a gale, and I almost thought that there was a tornado; then I saw the first clouds begin to cover the stars as a violent summer thunderstorm came rolling in. I had never experienced anything like it—going from clear and calm conditions to a full-blown storm in less than five minutes. Just as my mind finished processing what had happened, the rain came whipping in like small bullets. Alexander and I ran for the tents—as did everyone else.

Alex was very frightened of thunder, and the booming sound started to roll over the hillside in waves. He climbed onto his cot as I sealed up his tent. He was still clutching the long empty Capri Sun container, holding it in his shaking hands just outside of his sleeping bag.

I took it from him.

“Dad . . . please don’t go.” His words came through chattering teeth just as a flash briefly brought daylight to the mountain, soon to be followed by a thunderclap.

I lay down next to his sleeping bag on the cot with him.

“It is going to be all right. I promise.” It was the first thing I said all evening that I knew might not have been entirely correct. I was confident that, even through the now-torrential rains coming down on the outside of the tent, he and the camp would be fine. I didn’t have the same confidence about the tour to Afghanistan.

The storm subsided after nearly a full hour of battering Goshen. I stayed close to Alex for another half hour to make sure he was asleep.

I sat across from him on the other cot in the tent and looked at him for a long time and wondered. What would he be like as a man . . . and would I be there to see him? I started to tear up thinking about how fortunate I had been, how by so many miracles God had somehow blessed me with continued existence and the gift of this wonderful young man. I said a small prayer, thanking Him for Alexander and asked Him to protect and preserve me to see my son again.

INTO AFGHANISTAN

JULY 11, 2003: I've ridden in a lot of C-130s before—and they never get any easier. The stiff nylon mesh seats are pressed up against the aluminum membrane of the plane; after five minutes of sitting upright, there is just no way to get comfortable. The constant vibration sinks into your bones. The earplugs expand to the size of marshmallows in your ears. The dry air also seems always either too hot or too cold. Nope. It never gets any better.

I was headed into my first war zone, so I wasn't exactly expecting an in-flight movie and a hot meal.

I was now [REDACTED] and I was packed in along with eighty others going forward into Afghanistan, headed to my new duties to run the Defense Intelligence Agency's operations on the ground. I had several titles, but in sum, my job involved overseeing human intelligence, case officers, interrogators, polygraphists, planners, the Document Exploitation (DOCEX) Detachment (document recovery team), and DIA's secret intelligence aviation equipment—among other responsibilities. Sort of a jack-of-all-trades. Master of some.

I would work as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, supporting the two primary U.S. fighting forces in Afghanistan at the time: Combined Joint Task Force 180 (the conventional forces) and Joint Task Force [REDACTED]. All told, the United States was operating in a country larger than Iraq with fewer than about 10,500 men on the ground—and fewer than 2,000 were actual combat forces.

The mission of the two task forces was: First, to conduct operations to destroy remaining al Qaeda and Taliban and its leadership; second, to provide command control and train the Afghan army; and third, to conduct civil/military operations and humanitarian assistance operations to stabilize Afghanistan and to establish conditions for economic success that would deter the reemergence of terrorism.

The stateside intro to my new job was minimal. No PowerPoint presentations or thick briefing books. Sure, I'd gotten training on off-road and high-speed driving—shooting out of cars and in school houses—and reaction drills in a live-fire environment. But DoD was just a little preoccupied with the *other* war underway, and the Afghanistan operation had seen a steady leakage of resources, personnel and equipment over to Iraq.

In fact, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld had already declared in May 2003 that major combat activity in Afghanistan was over. He said during a visit to Kabul with Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai that we'd moved to “a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities.” Most of the country, he said, “is secure.”

[REDACTED]

Even so, working on a clandestine computerized operation is different from actually being there.

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