

The Ranger Objective

David Rivers, prequel

by Jason Kasper, ...

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To all the vets that brought their battles home.

**September 11, 2002
Shigal Valley
Kunar Province, Afghanistan**

The machinegun grip felt cool and reassuring in my hand as I maneuvered the barrel from my rocky vantage point.

While the valley floor far below me swarmed with emerald treetops, the windswept Afghan mountainsides rising from either side of it comprised the most unforgiving terrain I could imagine. Impossibly steep hills were terraced with primitive clusters of buildings that appeared to be carved out of the mountain, and the remaining rock faces were sliced by thin plateaus teeming with crops.

My machinegun sights stopped at a small cluster of mud buildings with flat roofs, their surfaces an identical shade of tan to the stony hillsides around them. How could people occupy such a rugged and alien landscape? Yet I caught glimpses of colorful clothing slipping between buildings as people went about their chores, and the sound of bleating goats and barking dogs reached me between erratic bursts of mountain wind.

There was not a scrap of visible human progress that exceeded the Stone Age. Nestled just across the border from the tribal region of northwest Pakistan, these people truly existed in a forgotten corner of the earth. The greatest infusion of technology in this entire valley was automatic weapons and rockets made in distant lands—some belonging to us, and some to the enemy.

Glancing down the hill to my left, I saw the Ranger squad filing down a rocky cliff face toward the buildings. The soldiers appeared as small tan figures maneuvering into position with an assortment of dark weapons. It was a moving sight: Rangers sweeping up the valley wearing American flags on the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

Just one year earlier, I'd been nearing the end of Basic Training, a journey that had—

“All right, Slick.” I heard Remy’s Alabamian drawl beside me. “Pop off that gun.”

He slid a can of dip back into the shoulder pocket of his desert fatigues, spitting the first long stream of wintergreen tobacco juice onto the ground beside him.

“Listen, Remy,” I began, fondly stroking the grip, “me and this machinegun were made for each other. Sometimes you just know. How else could it feel so... so *right*?”

“Well, when I get killed you can carry that sumbitch all day. Till then, you’re still my AG. Pop off.”

I pushed myself left and he slid his lanky frame behind the machinegun, settling into place with a practiced repetition. One hand was against the buttstock, cheek resting on knuckles as he rocked the massive weapon forward on its bipod and scanned for movement below.

Of course he looked natural, I thought. Remy had been in the unit for two years, and, at legal drinking age, was practically a senior citizen among our group of privates.

I settled onto the rock surface beside him with considerably less finesse, adjusting the heavy belt of machinegun ammo stretching from my rucksack to the gun. Then I picked up my assault rifle and joined Remy in scanning the village, though that was secondary in my job as the AG.

The assistant gunner.

The new guy.

Carry the ammo, and let Remy do the shooting.

Sure, I was supposed to spot targets for him as well, but an experienced gunner like Remy didn't need my help any more than a pro quarterback needed a water boy.

Scanning through my rifle optic, I asked, "So where are all these barrel-chested Islamic fighters we're supposed to be schwacking right now?" I swept my sights across the distant slits of shadow beneath roof overhangs. If someone was going to contest the arrival of a Ranger squad searching for weapon caches, I thought, that's where they'd emerge.

Hearing no immediate response from Remy, I added, "Shigal Valley is supposed to be so badass, I thought we'd be knee-deep in Taliban bodies by now."

Finally Remy replied, "First mission of the trip. They can't all be winners, Slick. Have some patience."

"Easy for you to say. I was stuck in the asbestos-deathtrap barracks at Airborne School last year while you were parachuting into Afghanistan, racking up confirmed kills and delivering American justice at six hundred rounds per minute. How many bad guys did you tag that first night?"

He shook his head slightly behind the machinegun sights. "Slick, you probably know better than I do after making me tell you the story so many damn times."

"I didn't 'make' you, Remy. You were *obligated* to tell me once for every three times you asked to see a picture of my girlfriend. It's called a barter system."

"Well," he offered, "you won't need to hear about the last deployment for much longer. You're gonna have your own stories soon enough."

"That's what I thought, too, until my first couple days on patrol have been dry hole after dry hole."

"What do you expect, Slick? This entire valley's got a bunch of Rangers up its ass right now. With machineguns, rockets, attack helicopters—"

"Helicopters are refueling," I corrected him. "So why isn't anyone shooting at us yet?"

He released a mighty sigh. "When I was as cherry as you are, I used to pray to the god of war too. But remember, this shit ain't no fun when the rabbit's got the gun."

"Oh, it'll be fun. We're on a Ranger patrol in Afghanistan on the first anniversary of 9/11." Smiling, I reached back and patted a pouch holding my rolled American flag. "This couldn't be any more patriotic if we wrapped ourselves in our flags."

Remy paused for a long time after that.

Then he said, "Know why every Ranger carries an American flag, Slick? It ain't patriotism. If you get killed, that's what we cover your body with till the MEDEVAC comes."

Our radios crackled to life before I could reply.

"*Gun Six*," the squad leader transmitted, "*we're preparing to make entry on the outbuildings.*"

Remy didn't move, eyes fixed behind the machinegun. "Tell 'em we got nuthin' and we're ready."

I looked up from my rifle optic and touched my radio without keying the button to transmit. Then I said in Remy's Southern accent, "We got nuthin' and we're ready."

"Shit ain't funny!" Remy scolded.

“How does that not get old?” I asked no one in particular, then keyed my radio to transmit, “Gun Six copies, no movement to report. Standing by for visual.”

The Ranger squad below had vanished from view behind a cluster of trees. I gave a final scan of the objective, half expecting to see Afghan men fleeing or preparing to ambush any approaching American soldiers.

But the village was now deathly still.

A Ranger point man stepped out from the tree line, leading his fire team toward the outbuildings while the other half of the squad remained stationary to cover their movement.

“Gebhart’s in the open,” I said to Remy.

“I see him. Shifting right. Make sure that—”

I heard the blast of a sniper rifle, and Gebhart fell in place before the shot’s echo swept over the hills.

The response from the Ranger squad was immediate as they returned fire, the chattering bursts from their automatic weapons spilling across the valley. Clouds of red fog blossomed around Gebhart’s body as smoke grenades provided concealment for his recovery. Someone in the squad fired a rocket that streaked upward, slicing through the sky before exploding on the hill to our right.

“Pack up!” Remy shouted. I unsnapped the links binding my ammo belt to the machinegun as the squad leader’s voice came over the radio.

“Gun Six, get on top of that ridge to your right. You’re going to see a dark patch of woods on the hilltop. Burn it the fuck down, that’s where the sniper is hiding—”

Remy was already pushing himself upright, lifting the machinegun and running toward the high ground by the time I slipped my arms through my rucksack straps. Struggling to my feet like an upended turtle against the anvil of machinegun ammo now anchored to my back, I almost left my assault rifle behind before snatching it as an afterthought.

Turning amid the reverberating howl of the firefight between the Ranger squad and an enemy sniper, I caught sight of Remy’s gangly figure hauling the machinegun uphill. I raced after him, fighting for breath in the thin mountain air, the inside of my mouth coated with a film of sand.

The surreally high-pitched chirp of Ranger grenade launchers punched through the air, countered by the resulting crash of their high explosive rounds beyond the ridge I now approached.

Remy’s voice over my radio: *“—shift fire left, Gun Six on high ground—”*

The low *crump* of another impacting grenade round echoed against the cacophony of automatic weapons, interspersed with the jangle of the exposed ammo belt slapping against my rucksack. I could feel the long, snaking chain of machinegun ammo shifting on my back, disrupting my forward momentum as Remy’s form disappeared over the crest.

He was on his own. I couldn’t keep up, and yet I couldn’t possibly move any faster.

I reached the bottom of the slope and launched myself into a frantic uphill scramble. An ornate stone formation guarded the crest of the hill, and I desperately fought against gravity to reach it.

As I battled up the sandy, rock-strewn hillside, I heard the squad leader’s voice on my radio: *“—confirm shift fire, lay waste up there, Remy—”*

Pulling myself atop the ridge at last, I saw sloping terrain dotted with scrub brush and low trees. A long stretch of exposed rock gave way to a darkly forested patch of woods: the sniper's hiding spot, exactly as the squad leader had described.

And it was being decimated by the Ranger squad.

Brown clouds rose between shadowy pine trees as the puffs of impacting bullets and grenade rounds felled boughs, which crashed to the earth as Ranger counterfire chopped the forest apart.

Yet the sound of another sniper shot sliced through the din.

"—fuck over here now, David!"

Remy's voice jarred me out of my daze of disbelief, and I followed the sound to find him already in the prone position, gun pointing at the woods from a shallow depression in the dirt.

Racing to his left, I spun and fell backwards, letting my rucksack absorb the impact. I writhed out of the straps, then rolled onto my belly and yanked the ammo belt free.

Remy seamlessly held his firing position as I struggled to manipulate the dull gray metal links to connect my ammo belt with the short string of rounds still hanging from the machinegun. My hands were slippery with sweat, the bullet casings sliding out of place beneath my fingertips.

"Come on, Slick!"

Finally I managed to hook an empty C-shaped link around the first bullet casing in Remy's ammo belt, feeling the *snap* that connected my rucksack full of ammo to the gun.

I shouted, "We're linked!"

Those two words had barely left my mouth before Remy thumbed the safety off his machinegun and opened fire.

The sky around us thudded with the rapid booming cadence of the machinegun roaring to life. It chomped through the belt of ammo that I now pulled from my rucksack in increments, the massive gun ravenous for the hundreds of linked bullets waiting to be launched into a forest that hid an unseen sniper.

Beneath the frenetic pace of machinegun bursts was the thin clatter of brass and links piling up on the rock surface below as the mountain air became choked by gunpowder.

The humming cackle of machinegun fire was soothing, reassuring in its calibrated familiarity, bringing order to chaos. Remy's gun was the most casualty-producing weapon in an entire Ranger platoon, much less the single squad below, and I felt myself grinning as he brought it into the fight, raking a stream of fire-orange tracer rounds across the swath of dark woods.

Another sniper shot rang out.

"*Gun Six,*" the squad leader transmitted breathlessly, "*be advised, we're still taking effective sniper fire.*"

I looked to Remy for guidance on my response and instead saw him break his grip on the machinegun to key his own radio.

"Roger, we can try and maneuver closer."

"*Negative, stay in place. We recovered Gebhart, he's gonna make it. Apaches are inbound for airstrike before the MEDEVAC chopper lands. ETA less than ten mikes.*"

“Copy, Gun Six remaining in place.” I felt a rush of elation upon hearing that Gebhart hadn’t been killed, but after releasing his radio, Remy spat to the side and hissed “*Fuck*” before resuming his grip on the buttstock without firing.

“What?” I picked up my assault rifle and scanned the darkly wooded hilltop for movement.

“Nuthin’. We’ll just have to get that sniper another day.”

“What do you mean, another day? Apaches are about to turn those woods into a dumpster fire.” I looked around the hilltop. “He’s got nowhere to go except toward Rangers or on a death fall down the mountain.”

“He knows that. Bet you a paycheck there’s a way out on the other side of this hill.”

“What are you, the Taliban Whisperer? How can you know?”

Remy spat again, and when he spoke next he sounded disgusted. “We’re fighting human beings now, not hunting white-tailed deer. This sniper’s no amateur, Slick. He didn’t hit us until our birds were off-station. He knows our tactics as well as we do. Soon as he hears rotor blades headed his way, he’s gone.”

“We’ve got two more days on this patrol,” I panted in disbelief, still trying to catch my breath. “If he gets away he’s going to shoot another Ranger before we leave the valley.” Looking to Remy, I concluded, “Unless you want to see one of our boys covered by his own American flag, we need to kill this sniper while he’s still in front of us.”

“Course we do. The catch is gettin’ that done without being the next casualties. That’s why he’s got us dead to rights.”

“We can relocate around the hill, find his escape route. When he runs, we drill him. Mission complete.”

Remy sounded composed now, resigning himself to the situation. “Negative, Slick. We’re staying put until those Apaches get here and light up the hilltop. We take this machinegun near the woods, that sniper will hear us coming and smoke us both. You’re crawfishin’ between a *possible* Ranger casualty in the next two days versus two *guaranteed* casualties right now: you and me.”

He was right. Both the machinegun and its ammo were loud and exceedingly cumbersome to move. The two of us would give ourselves away long before we got close enough to make a difference.

Then my mind’s eye replayed the scene of Gebhart falling in place, victim to the sniper’s bullet. But when the body hit the ground, splayed out in a pool of blood, it was no longer Gebhart in my imagination.

It was Remy.

Shaking the thought clear, I glanced sideways to see my gunner alive and well beside me, his slight jawline bulging with a wad of dip.

I lifted my cheek from the stock of the assault rifle and gazed into the dark, distant forest. Looking sideways, then behind me, and then past Remy, I considered the terrain, assessing the low ground and blind spots around us. A breeze blew overhead, chilling the sweat-soaked fatigues clinging to my back. The acrid gun smoke grew stale before losing itself in the wind.

Swallowing hard, I opened a pocket in my rucksack and withdrew a single smoke grenade, then slid the metal canister into a cargo pocket of my fatigue pants. “Remy, you need to keep shooting.”

“Naw, Slick. We’d be wasting ammo now. I can’t kill the sniper—”

“Not to kill the sniper,” I panted, feeling my chest constrict even as I spoke with dead certainty. “To cover the sound.”

“Sound of *what?*”

I drew a final breath, then grabbed my radio and spoke into it. “Cease fire on forest, David maneuvering on enemy sniper. Remy will provide covering fire.”

Remy looked at me with an expression somewhere between shock and disbelief. “I told you that shit ain’t funny. I know you didn’t transmit. Didn’t even do your bull-sheeyit accent.”

The squad leader replied, “*Negative, negative—*”

Grabbing my assault rifle and rolling away from Remy, I pushed myself to my feet and began to run. Remy’s hand swiped my boot as he tried to grab me, but I wrenched away and sped down the hill behind him.

As I circled around the hilltop in a flanking maneuver, staying in the low ground and out of view from the dark forest, I half expected Remy to tackle me from behind.

Instead, I heard him open fire with the machinegun.

I’d left Remy no choice—he either had to abandon his gun and try to catch me or continue shooting in begrudging support of my plan. He’d chosen the latter.

Between his machinegun bursts, I caught him transmitting to the line squad.

“*David’s maneuvering, cease fire...*”

I was running as I never had before, rounding the low ground beside the forest. No machinegun ammo, no rucksack weighing me down; instead I was free to choose, free to react instinctively.

Glancing down the hill to my right, I took in the surroundings as if looking to them for reassurance. Blotches of darkness pooled beneath scattered trees on the hills around me, rising out of the dead earth. The bottom of the mountain was swathed in a belt of shadow, its natural beauty concealed by the absence of light.

The valley beneath me slid away into sharply mottled creases, while my immediate terrain deteriorated the farther I proceeded along my flanking maneuver. Crumbling rocks littered the hillside, and errant scrub brush was the only vegetation in sight. No cover, no concealment. And while I was well out of the sniper’s view from the hilltop forest, I was also far beyond sight of any Ranger forces. I’d have to keep moving, find the escape route before setting up a hasty ambush for the sniper that would soon flee.

As I cut left around the far side of the hilltop, I grabbed at rock crevices packed with vines and gnarled tree roots. Emerging from the low ground and heading toward the hilltop, I glanced beyond a layer of stone outcroppings to make out glimpses of the darkened treetops.

The sharp slope was now so steep that I had to rotate my rifle to my back and scramble up on all fours. Loose earth and stray rocks scattered downward beneath me, but Remy’s comforting machinegun bursts concealed my noise.

I began to make out patches of light blue sky through the treetops, but as I reached the hilltop ledge, the view was soon obscured by the forest’s edges. My heart was hammering in my chest, my ears ringing from the earlier gunfire, my brow oozing sweat that ran in rivulets down the side of my face.

I slid around a tangle of dry scrub brush too thick to push my way through and stopped beside a tree trunk to scan for the sniper's escape route.

To my relief, the route was there, just as Remy said it would be. The lone path out of the dark forest was a thin strip of woods that bridged the saddle leading to the next hilltop. Any other direction out of the forest led either toward Rangers or into a sheer rock face too steep to negotiate on foot.

I tasted metal and smelled clouds of dust from the Ranger counterfire that had ended minutes ago. Now that I had a clear view of the escape route, I carefully slid into a kneeling firing position and readied my weapon in anticipation of the sniper's appearance.

My radio projected Remy's garbled voice.

"...need to check in, Slick..."

A sharp *crack* from a sniper round split the tree trunk beside me. I flung myself downward as the gunshot echoed in my skull, the loudest noise I'd ever heard. Between panting breaths, I caught a whiff of burning pine from the bullet smoldering in the tree next to my head.

I glanced up and saw the scrub brush around me, traces of sunlight glinting off delicate branches that trembled in the wind.

Why wasn't I scared?

A second round split the air over my head, followed by a third that churned a divot of earth a few feet to my left.

I slid backward down the rock face and out of sight from the woods, keying my radio.

"I made it to the other side," I exhaled. "I have his escape route covered."

Remy sounded furious. *"You ain't got shit covered! Apaches are a few minutes out and ground-to-air comms are down. They can't reach the pilots to call off the strike. Get your ass back here!"*

I looked to both sides, considering my options. While the sniper knew my current location, I could still move even closer to the wooded saddle between hills, my only chance of repositioning myself while still cutting off his escape route.

To move in any other direction, including back toward Remy, would be to save the sniper's life. Two days left on our patrol, and zero chance he wouldn't take another shot at us.

Thumbing the transmit button on my radio, I said, "I'll get the sniper first. Going off comms."

"No, goddamnit, those Apaches will—"

I turned off the radio, then scrambled downhill and cut across the low ground to move even further from Remy, closing the distance between me and the sniper's only way out.

My pulse was racing, heart slamming as I reached the strip of vegetation dipping into a faraway hill. I took up a covered position behind a tree that gave me a vantage point both ways. The dark patch of woods loomed on the hilltop, dangerously close and impenetrably dense. Placing my assault rifle stock against my shoulder, I waited to see what the sniper's next move would be with a single thought.

Checkmate, motherfucker.

But my elation came too soon, and when the sniper cast his vote on how the gunfight would proceed, it almost killed me outright.

His next shot whizzed so close to my head that a loud ringing erupted in my left ear.

I didn't take cover and valorously return fire as my training dictated; instead, an animalistic instinct caused me to fling myself backward, landing hard before crawling behind another tree as more bullets snapped through the air around me.

The sniper was trying to finish me off from afar, I realized, before he sprinted across the saddle to freedom. He knew he couldn't move any nearer until I was dead. His sniper rifle was virtually useless at close range, whereas my assault rifle would dominate a battle of reflexive fire. His safety was in distance, mine in proximity.

If I remained stationary, he'd locate a firing position in the dark woods from which to finish me off for good—we both knew the Apaches were on their way to annihilate us. Either one of us would emerge alive, or neither of us would. No other options were possible.

I either had to turn the tables right now or end up being covered with my American flag.

A replay of Remy's voice echoed in my mind: *This sniper's no amateur, Slick... He knows our tactics as well as we do.*

My only chance of killing the sniper, I knew at once, was to violate all military tactics.

I slid the smoke grenade from my cargo pocket, pulling the ring and flinging it to my right as hard as I could. A hollow pop preceded the zinging hiss of the grenade coming to life, and seconds later I could see a billowing fog of crimson rising up among the trees.

The sniper opened fire, shooting rounds into the smoke. With his precision scope, he could only focus on one thing at a time—and if he was trying to hit someone using the smoke to conceal their movement, then he wasn't watching the exposed ground in the opposite direction. I jumped to my feet and sprinted left, away from the smoke.

And mere moments before the sniper realized his mistake, I plunged into the forest.

My ploy had bought me only seconds, but they were seconds I desperately needed to close the gap. By the time the sniper caught my movement in his peripheral vision, I was inside the grove of trees concealing him. He reoriented his rifle toward me, betraying a shift of movement in the underbrush—and I sped toward it via a circuitous route to keep as many trees between us as I could.

The next fifteen seconds were a zigzagging sprint of feverish intensity as I darted from cover to cover in the thickly wooded tangle of trees and brush. My vision registered green moss smeared across the stones below me and blurry images of pine boughs to my front. Then I caught sight of a spark of flame from his muzzle blast as rounds cracked through the air, bullets slicing into tree trunks and snapping through branches as I ran.

But the closer I got, the less accurate his fire grew. His shots became a beating snare drum until they abruptly stopped altogether—he was reloading.

Now within ten feet, it was my turn to send the sniper for cover. I fired half a dozen rounds toward him as he scrambled away. Then I broke into an all-out sprint, vaulting a fallen tree toward a head-on impasse with my enemy. Facing the greatest pressure I'd ever experienced, my focus was steeled to the single task in front of me. There would be no second chances.

I took a sharp sidestep right as I approached the location of the muzzle flash. Seeing another blur of movement amid the brush, I fired three more rounds at it while still moving at a full run.

Bang bang bang.

The sound of my shots ended in a human cry.

Skidding to a stop, I pivoted in place and took aim toward the noise. I fired twice more. A man rolled sideways on the ground, dropping the rifle magazine he'd been trying to reload. I centered my aim on his torso, finger tensing against the trigger. Then I froze in place, horrified.

My mind couldn't process what I was seeing—had I just shot an American?

He was no Afghan fighter, but a man as white as I was, with short-cropped hair and a bushy red beard. He was wincing in pain and disbelief. Was he from some Special Forces recon team I didn't know about?

But the sniper rifle beside him was a Soviet Dragunov.

One side of his mottled camouflage jacket was darkened with a slick of bright red, as if he'd fallen in a puddle of scarlet paint. His eyes met mine, unapologetic. With my weapon at the ready, I stared into icy blue irises that smoldered as life slipped from them.

"Chyort voz'mi..." he gasped, in what sounded like Russian. *"Ty zhe prosto pacan."*

He wasn't American or Afghan, I realized, but a foreign fighter from Chechnya.

At first I couldn't believe it—after circling the globe with my comrades in pursuit of Taliban or Al Qaeda, I'd instead come face-to-face with a Caucasian man who'd traveled from an Islamic Russian republic to wage jihad against the Americans.

I didn't consciously fire my next rounds. Instead, I simply felt the rifle tensing against my shoulder as if of its own accord, followed by the sound of blasting shots until those blue eyes went vacant.

Then I reloaded, stuffing the partially spent rifle magazine in my cargo pocket, the action reflexive after hundreds of repetitions in training. Viewed from a distance, I would have appeared a consummate warrior: fearless, robotic in my lethality.

But in my mind, the situation was far different—I was a nineteen-year-old kid standing on an unnamed hilltop on the far side of the world, my first encounter with an enemy combatant now a corpse who looked like any number of men in my Virginia hometown, which now seemed a lifetime away.

My thoughts were foggy, dreamlike, but my actions were automated: crisp and precise and in stark contrast to the awkward fumbling of the Ranger private and assistant gunner I'd been before entering that forest.

I completed my magazine change, scanned for any additional enemies, and turned on my radio.

"Remy," I transmitted, my voice steel, "The sniper is dead."

Instead of his response I heard a deep, undulating thunder from the sky to my front, rolling slow and distant but growing louder as the seconds ticked by.

Remy's voice was panicked, feverish, like I'd never heard. "*They still can't make comms with the pilots! Apaches are inbound to smoke that hilltop!*"

The throbbing hum I now heard was the churning rotor blades of approaching attack helicopters. And I stood at the pinnacle of that forest, ground zero of their imminent attack.

But I didn't feel fear, or urgency; instead, a detached numbness overtook me as I replied, "Copy."

"*Copy?*" Remy spat back. Then, outraged, "*Copy?! Get the fuck out of there, Slick! Run, now!*"

I turned off my radio again.

I could have fled before Hellfire missiles impacted on top of me, their explosions preceding long bursts of 30mm chain gun. But instead I cast a final glance at my fallen enemy before proceeding toward the approaching helicopters.

The rotors grew louder as I stepped out of the forest, climbing atop a rocky crest to face the cobalt depths above me, feeling like I now stood at the top of the world. A rippling spine from a distant mountain range carved a line between sky and earth, the boundary spiky with pine trees.

Two distant dark specks were silhouetted against the endless blue expanse, growing in size and sound as they raced toward me. My lungs screamed for air, my mouth was parched with a cottony thirst as my adrenaline receded.

Yet I felt surreally calm as I reached back with one dirt-smeared hand, opened a pouch on my kit, and reached inside.

I pulled out a tightly rolled cloth and shook it free. My American flag unfurled to its full length, the red, white, and blue clear and vivid against the primitive landscape. I lifted my arms, letting the flag catch the wind so the Apaches could see it.

Now I could distinctly make out the angled profiles of the most advanced attack helicopters money could buy, their noses bulbous with advanced optics. Sunlight glinted against the panels of armored glass shielding the pilots, the insect-like extension of their chain guns rotating toward me.

Then the helicopters spun sideways on either side of the hilltop, exposing their armored bellies. Their stubby wings bore neatly aligned missiles and rocket pods while precision rotors carved a circular swath above them. Twin engines emitted streaky hazes of exhaust that blurred the air as they roared past, their sculpted tails vanishing in my periphery as I stood alone, tightly grasping my flag.

The distant horizon appeared bleak in the Afghan sun, obscured by desolate, barren trees silhouetted against the backdrop of endless mountains.

It was the first anniversary of 9/11. I'd just achieved the pinnacle of all I'd ever aspired to do: avenging my countrymen, defending my friends, and succeeding on the Ranger objective. In my first gunfight I'd demonstrated a rush of extraordinary audacity, and acted boldly, almost suicidally. And I'd done so for no clearly appointed end. But as I would soon discover, that spontaneous action would come to epitomize the subsequent years of my life.

Because darkness was soon to fall.

After that deployment to Afghanistan, and after the invasion of Iraq several months later, the fallout from war would take hold of me.

Six years to the day after narrowly defeating that enemy sniper on a hilltop in Afghanistan, I would no longer be a Ranger.

I would be a mercenary, an assassin in exile far from my homeland.

And a new war would just be beginning.

