

CHAPTER ONE

I am one of the first to arrive.

I've heard all the rumours. It's best to get here early and claim a decent billet – ideally one tucked away in a corner, and definitely on a lower bunk. It's only a thin, khaki green sheet of foam that I'm laying claim to here, but this is where I'll lay my battered and tortured body every night for the weeks to come, racked with pain and exhaustion and craving sleep.

If you're a late arrival you'll be left with a place by the door, and that could make all the difference between passing or failing whatever hell lies ahead of us. Every time someone opens the door you'll get a blast of bitter, icy, January weather down your neck. And for sure people will be banging in and out for a piss all night long, as we'll need to drink bucket-loads in an effort to rehydrate.

I throw my Bergen onto my chosen billet – the one that's the furthest from the door – and tuck a rough green Army dog blanket into the bottom of the bunk above. That way, the blanket hangs down like a curtain, providing just a touch of privacy and separation from the doss-pits next to mine.

Enshrouded in my dog blanket curtain it'll be total darkness, almost like a makeshift basha in the jungle. After each of the tortuous days that lie ahead I'll need that sanctuary, and some proper sleep, if I'm to stand any chance of making it through.

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There's one other crucial advantage to getting a bottom bunk. You avoid the risk of jumping down from one above on sore and battered legs, and the impact further straining or breaking already torn and shredded limbs.

My makeshift dog blanket shelter done, I settle down to wait for the next arrivals.

I'm six foot four, and the steel and corrugated iron bed feels like it's been built for a dwarf. My head's jammed against the wall, and my feet dangle way over the end. I'll have to sleep curled up like a foetus. But at least with a lower bunk, if I do roll out I don't have so far to fall onto the bare concrete below.

I glance around at the inhospitable, spartan billet. It's an old Nissen hut – a thin, corrugated steel construction not a great deal more substantial than a chicken shed. There are ten bunks ranged like skeletal ribs down either side of the room, their paint chipped and fading, the frames sagging in places. It's enough for forty blokes in all, which makes up a full complement for what's coming.

The thin mattress beneath me is encased in a horrible, wipe-clean, sweaty plastic covering – the kind of thing you wouldn't wish on a young kid who pees the bed. It's there so that those who bleed, or puke or piss themselves through exhaustion don't leave a permanent legacy for the next batch who're mad enough to volunteer for this self-inflicted torment.

Welcome to Sennybridge Camp, I tell myself wryly, the base for all British Special Forces selection – including that of the Special Air Service (SAS), the Special Boat Service (SBS) and the tiny, elite unit that I burn to be a part of: The Pathfinders.

British Special Forces selection is widely regarded as being the toughest in the world. The American military model their own selection on what we do here, at this run-down, grotty, rain-lashed dump of a place. Those who founded Delta Force came here to attempt UKSF selection, so as to ascertain just how hard they could afford to abuse and torture their own soldiers.

In a way I've been lucky in my training, for I've been briefed in

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detail about what to expect. Jack Quinn, a fellow PARA Regiment bloke, had made it into the SAS, but was returned to unit (RTU'd) due to a bit of lightweight skulduggery. He'd switched the wheels from a hire car they were using on SAS business onto his own vehicle.

Unfortunately, he'd been rumbled and RTU'd – at which point I offered him a deal. If he helped me train for selection and briefed me on what to look out for, I'd buy him a new set of alloy wheels for his motor. Pathfinder (PF) selection is basically the same as that for the SAS, only it's shorter – being five weeks of initial torture, as opposed to six months. Jack Quinn would make an ideal mentor.

Some claim that PF selection covers the same ground as the SAS in less time, which makes it more intense and challenging. Others argue that it's quicker, which lowers the attrition rate. Jack didn't particularly give a shit either way. As far as he was concerned, I needed to be every bit as physically and mentally prepared for PF selection as he had been for that of the SAS.

And it was Jack who'd given me the nod to arrive early so as to claim the best billet.

The next bloke to pitch up takes the other corner bunk furthest from the door, so the one directly above mine. He's a little, wiry lance corporal from 3 PARA. He tells me he's an ultra-marathon runner, and he shows me the 'NO FEAR' tattoo he's got emblazoned on one shoulder. He's got a broad Welsh accent, and it's no surprise to learn that everyone calls him 'Taff'.

I tell him I'm a captain from 1 PARA and that everyone knows me as 'Dave'. Because this is selection, it's all first-name terms here regardless of rank. It's very likely the first time that Taff has ever addressed an officer by name, as opposed to 'sir'. It's that kind of classless ethos that has drawn me to the elite forces.

As a young captain not many years out of Sandhurst, I'd always believed that those who wish to lead have to earn the respect of those they expect to follow. Merit, regardless of rank – in my book,

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that's how the best military units should operate. The Pathfinders, I know, live and breathe that egalitarian kind of a spirit.

Another bloke pitches up. He's a massive, hulking Arnie Schwarzenegger look-alike. Typically, he's from the Royal Engineers, who only ever seem to come in the one size – monstrous. The Royal Engineers are well-respected, hard and toughened soldiers, and after the PARAs they make up the second biggest cap badge in The Pathfinders.

There's a good deal of rivalry between the PARAs and the Royal Engineers. The Engineers joke that PARAs are 'mince' – thick in the head – and that Engineers have a higher level of intellect, because they have to build stuff and not just shoot it up. The set PARA retort is: 'Mate, just concentrate on building us some shitters.' I don't think too many of us will be saying that to our Arnie double.

He dwarfs Taff, and I've got no doubt he's going to be the biggest bloke on selection. He looks absolutely fearsome, but that's not my main concern. As one of the next biggest blokes what I'm really dreading is getting teamed up with Arnie buddy-buddy fashion, and having to carry his massive frame across the rain-and-sleet-lashed moors.

Arnie chooses the corner bunk opposite mine and Taff's – a fine choice, with ours already taken. Next to arrive is another bloke from 3 PARA. He's got a long and morose face. It reminds me of a horse. Taff and the new arrival seem to know each other, for Taff breaks into a wide grin just as soon as he lays eyes on him.

"Ullo, Mark, mate . . . but why the long face?" he quips.

Often, the old jokes are still the best ones.

The new arrival tells Taff to 'f-off', and the ice is well and truly broken.

He's a private, Mark Kidman, and he hails from New Zealand. That country produces some highly regarded soldiers, and I've no doubt Mark is a class act. More to the point, he tells us he was offered a place as an officer in the regular British Army, but refused

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it. He did so simply because he wanted to try for selection into The Pathfinders – and that deserves a great deal of respect.

Two blokes arrive together and they're more 3 PARA lads. Al I know of old. He's tall, lean, scruffy and wolfish looking, and he doesn't give a toss about his appearance. The only time he looks in the mirror is to shave. If anyone comments on his looks, he gives a set response in a thick Leeds accent: 'Not fucking arsed, fucking am I?'

Al doesn't talk much and he's not the sharpest tool in the box, but he's known as being a superlative operator. He greets me with his typical dour, understated humour.

'Fucking all right then, Dave. We're gonna be fucking going on a fucking tab, then, eh?'

Tab is military speak for a Tactical Advance to Battle – a forced march under crushing pack and weapons. We're going to be doing more than just a few tabs on selection, and Al and I know it.

Jez is the other 3 PARA lad, and he's the real enigma. He's a private, but he's balding and well spoken and he sounds distinctly educated. He looks as if he's in completely the wrong kind of place right now. He'd be well at home in a tweed jacket and tie in the Officers' Mess, and being addressed as 'The Colonel'.

One of the last to arrive is Pete, who hails from the Grenadier Guards. He has no option but to take a bunk right next to the door. He is a chain-smoker and a ranker, and he's been in the Guards for a very long time. He wears nothing but Army-issue kit, and he seems to pride himself on being able to take any shit the Army can throw at him – including getting the bunk from hell.

Pete has got zero civvie mountaineering kit, and even his boots are standard Army issue. They've got cheap, flimsy soles and they look like they've been designed for a stint as a petrol pump attendant. As far as I can see he's the only one in the entire hut wearing Army-issue boots. The rest of us all have civvie footwear – either Altbergs or Scarpas, or in my case Lowes.

My Lowes are made of a tough, leather upper with a Vibram sole,

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to soak up the pounding impact of the forced marches. They're not Gore-Tex lined, as that would make the feet sweat too much, plus the Gore-Tex keeps the water in when wading through bogs, and there'll be plenty of that to come. It's the last thing you need on selection.

The Grenadier Guards are famed for their smartness, plus their drill. Sure enough, all of Pete's standard-issue kit is polished and pressed to perfection. The lads can't help ripping the piss.

'Hey, Pete! They've got a trouser press in the wash-house, mate.'

'Hurry – soon be time to get on parade.'

'You boys need some fucking drill,' Pete retorts. 'Bloody ill-disciplined PARAs.'

Oddly, one of the last pieces of kit that Pete pulls out of his Bergen is a book – some battered sci-fi thriller.

Al stares at it for a long second. 'What – the – fuck – is – that?' he asks, each word punctuated by a disgusted silence.

'It's a book,' says Pete. 'Sorry. Forgot. You PARAs can't read, can you?'

There's something hard and unshakeable in Pete's look, and he doesn't seem the least bit fazed by the slagging. He and I get talking and it turns out that he's a 'pad'. He lives on the pad – in Army accommodation and in the married quarters. It's another thing that marks him out as being a misfit, for the rest of us are very much unattached.

'So, erm, Dave, you were in SL with 1 PARA, weren't you?' Pete asks.

'Yeah, I was.'

'It was a NEO, wasn't it?'

'Yeah.'

SL is short for Sierra Leone, a nation in West Africa that had been torn apart by civil war. My battalion, 1 PARA, was sent there a few months back to carry out a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) – in layman's terms, pulling out all British and allied civilians. The rebel forces were poised to take the nation's

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capital, which would have caused a horrific bloodbath. We were flown into the teeth of that conflict to get our people out, and to stop the carnage.

‘You’d have to be a fire-pisser to be on that one,’ Pete remarks.

‘A what?’

Pete mimes as if he’s holding his cock. ‘Someone who pisses fire.’

‘Fair enough.’ I raise the obvious question. ‘So, mate, why’re you doing selection?’

Pete knows why I’m asking. He’s an older, married family man, and he’s clearly a well-established regular Army kind of a bloke.

He shrugs. ‘Last shot to do something exciting ... I love the Guards. I’ll always be true to my roots. But I don’t exactly think they’ll make me RSM, ’cause I’ve had more than a few run-ins. Pathfinder selection – it’s my last chance at being a fire-pisser.’

The crack with the guys is good and morale is high, but none of the torture has started yet. Plus there’s something else that I’m painfully aware of. I’m not just here to undertake Pathfinder selection. I’m here to see if I can make it through as second-in-command (2IC) of the unit, and that’s the added pressure that I’m under.

By midday all forty of us are present and correct. We head for the cookhouse, each of us carrying our own plate, mug, knife and fork. Sennybridge Camp is a temporary kind of set-up, and too much of the Army-issue cutlery has been nicked by those who went before us. These days, if you want to eat you have to bring your own tools.

We queue for food. It’s hot dog and chips and we pile it high. There are a couple of urns, one serving coffee and the other tea. It’s the cheapest, shittiest brew the Army can find, and whichever you choose it all tastes pretty much the same.

As we move off with our brews I spot a row of familiar figures, but there’s not a flash of recognition amongst them. They’re stony-faced and pretending they don’t know me.

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One is Lenny, the present 2IC of Pathfinders. He and I were on the piss together directly after Sierra Leone, and we got so hammered we woke up in bed together. I actually thought he was a bird at first, that's until my hand felt the stubble on his jaw. But right now he's acting as if he's never set eyes on me before.

Then there's Gavin and Tricky, two more PF stalwarts that I know well. But right at the moment they're the Directing Staff (DS) on selection, and they're here for one reason only – to beast us through the weeks of hell to come. In fact, the entire Pathfinder unit has pitched up so as to better handle the murderously intense pace of what's coming.

The PF lads have got their own, separate accommodation block and their own separate showers. To a man they're pretending they don't know me. I don't try to greet them, either. I understand there can't be even a hint of any matey-matey shit between us. No special allowances. Zero favouritism. No exceptions made for any man who doesn't make it through of his own accord.

The Pathfinders is an incredibly tight-knit unit and it only takes the best. It consists of six, six-man patrols – so thirty-six fighting men in all. Together with support staff – engineers, signallers and the like – that makes it a sixty-strong unit max. It may be small but it's perfectly formed, for Pathfinders are the most highly-trained and specialist mobility troops in the world.

Unlike the SAS and SBS, who are trained in all facets of anti-terrorism, anti-insurgency, regular and irregular warfare, Pathfinders train relentlessly for one thing only: insertion deep behind enemy lines on recce, capture, demolitions or kill missions. That's why The Pathfinders were originally formed, it remains the *raison d'être* of the unit today.

Pathfinders are experts at HALO (High Altitude Low Opening) and HAHO (High Altitude High Opening) parachute jumps, as means of covert deep penetration insertion. Via HAHO they can open their chutes at the kind of altitude airliners cruise at and drift

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silently and unseen for miles towards a distant target. Via HALO, they can skydive from very high altitude, as a fast and invisible means of getting onto the ground.

HALO and HAHO are the bread and butter of what The Pathfinders do, and it's what they're renowned for. I've seen the unit on exercises HALOing into a drop zone, arriving James Bond-like out of the silent and darkened heavens. It's that which first made me want to join the unit. But Pathfinders are equally highly-trained for insertions by foot or via light, off-road vehicles far behind enemy lines.

We get the food down us, and there's a lot less piss-taking and high spirits now. A massive bloke rises from the Pathfinders' end of the cookhouse. Stan Harris is the PF Platoon Sergeant. He's a giant of a Yorkshireman with a face as hard and as grey as a chiselled crag.

He's also a living legend in these circles. Amongst the many feats of soldiering he's renowned for, he won the Military Cross when The Pathfinders took on rebel forces in a pitched battle in the Sierra Leone jungle.

'Right, all youse want to join The Pathfinders, the first event is the eight-miler,' he announces, with zero ceremony. 'You must be with the DS at the end of the tab. If you're not, it's a fail.

'This is not like any other course in the Army.' He eyeballs the lot of us. 'If you're sick, lame or lazy, at any point you can voluntarily withdraw – VW. None of us is here to motivate you; if you want to go back to Battalion and do guards and duties with your mates for the rest of your life, then you're more than welcome to go.

'This isn't a face-fits unit,' he continues. 'There are some right criminal-looking bastards in the PF. We're looking for a few good men – those who can survive and deliver against all odds. All of us here in the PF – you call us "Staff". No one wears rank in our unit, so you don't need to worry about that. PF selection is fast and intense. It's not like the SAS, where all you've got to worry about for the first five weeks is tabbing. We've only got youse for

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six weeks, so after your tabs you've got lessons and more tests, and then if you're lucky you might get your head down.

'I'm sure you know the basics, so I won't waste any more of my precious breath, 'cause by the end of today some of youse won't be here.' He pauses for a long second, just to let the words sink in. 'If you do pass selection, you'll go on to continuation training, including combat survival and resistance to interrogation. You're on probation for the first year, in which time you must pass your HALO and HAHO courses, plus your comms and mobility cadres.'

He glances at the watch strapped to his massive, hairy wrist. 'It's 13.45. The armoury is two blocks down from your accom block. Go draw your weapons. Be on the parade square at 1400 hours with Bergens in front of youse, ready for weigh-in. If you're not at minimum weight we'll add it to your Bergen, plus a big rock so you'll be over weight for the tab. And remember, everything in your Bergen must be useful kit for winter in the mountains.'

For a moment his laser-eyed stare sweeps the room. It comes to rest on Pete. 'Well done, Sergeant Terry. You've just volunteered yourself to be in charge of the tea urn roster. Perfect work for a Guards sergeant. Make sure everyone takes a turn, and make fucking sure every time we go out there's two on the back of each of the four-tonners – that's one for you lot and one for the DS. If anyone forgets the tea urns I will be extremely pissed off and you'll be going up and down an additional mountain. Now, get away.'

We split.

The atmosphere has utterly changed. It's silent and tense and there's a real urgency in the air. I've got serious butterflies in my stomach, and I'm worried about whether I should have eaten as much as I have. I know I'll need the energy, but doing a forced march like what's coming on a full stomach can easily make you puke.

We head for the Nissen hut, grab our Bergens, then there's an argy-bargy at the armoury to be first to draw weapons. We're each issued with a dummy SLR – an ancient, self-loading rifle. It's the

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kind of weapon the British Army soldiered with a few decades ago, and we've only got it for the weight and the discipline, plus the added realism. But woe betide anyone who disrespects their weapon ...

Until recently, those doing selection used to be issued with real assault rifles. But too many were lost during the more extreme stages of selection, high on the hills and in atrocious weather conditions. Search parties had to be mounted to bring in the lost kit, and it all got a bit too much – hence the introduction of the dummy rifles.

We form up on the parade ground in three ranks, with our Bergens propped in front of us. Some of the blokes have laid their dummy SLRs on the ground beside their packs. It's another thing that Jack Quinn had warned me about: unless you're sleeping, you never, ever let your weapon leave your hand, and even then it's got to be just a quick grab away.

Stan Harris stops dead in front of the first bloke who's committed this heinous crime. 'First fucking thing is this,' he yells into the offender's face. 'In the PF you NEVER, EVER put your weapon on the fucking ground. If you EVER need to put your weapon down rest it on your feet or your pack.'

'Staff,' the offender confirms, grabbing his dummy rifle.

'Your weapon must at all times be within arm's reach,' he continues. 'If you fuck up, we run a fine system. You'll be fined every time, and you'll soon fucking learn. Money goes into a fund and we drink it in a piss-up at the end – that's for those who pass. Anyone got a problem with that?'

Silence.

'If I catch anyone using their weapon as a walking stick when you're out on the hills tabbing, you'll be RTU'd, no messing.' He turns to a lean and hard-looking bloke beside him. It's Tricky, his fellow DS. 'Time to weigh in their kit.' He turns back to us. 'You lot – remove your water and food.'

We're each supposed to start with a Bergen laden with 35 pounds of kit, that's not counting water and food. As the days progress,

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we'll keep upping the weight in increments, until we're tabbing under a crushing load. The DS will keep checking us at the start and end of each stage to make sure no one's shirking.

As we pull out all the scoff and the bottles from our Bergens, most blokes are carrying high-energy drinks and protein bars. But I always have at least one Ginsters Cornish pasty in my Bergen. It's real, hearty food and I've got it as a special treat. Just the knowledge that it's in there can prove a real boost to morale.

Tricky sees the pasty, and shakes his head in disgust. 'What – the fuck – is that?'

'Ginsters pasty, Staff.'

Tricky lets out a snort of disbelief. 'What, a Ginsters Cornish pasty as recommended by the British Olympic Committee?'

'Staff.'

No one so much as sniggers. We all of us know that if you laugh at the DS's jokes, they're just as likely to turn on you.

Tricky and I know each other from the Sierra Leone op, plus we've been out on the beers together. But right now I realise that the DS are very likely to give me a doubly hard time. Firstly, so as to be absolutely certain they are not showing any favouritism, and secondly because I am trying for the 2IC's slot in their closely-guarded unit.

I decide I'm going to have to try to be the 'grey man' here – the bloke who does nothing to get himself noticed or singled out still further. That way, I might just escape from the worst of the DS's ire.

We weigh in fine with our Bergens, all apart from the one bloke who's a kilo under. Tricky glances at Stan Harris, who indicates a sizeable boulder lying at the edge of the parade ground.

'Right, go fetch that fucking rock,' Tricky tells the offender.

I can see the sheer panic written on the bloke's face as he realises what's coming. He scuttles off, lifts the rock, brings it back and Tricky piles it into the top of his Bergen. He gets the scales and weighs it for a second time.

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He smiles. 'You're two kilos over. Tough shit. I'll be weighing your Bergen at the end of the eight-miler, and it'd better be the same fucking weight.'

'Right, enough fucking around!' Stan Harris yells. 'On the back of the four-tonners!'

We double-time it over to the battered khaki green Army trucks. Two are needed to carry the forty-odd blokes starting selection. The tailgate on a four-tonner is heavy, and it takes two blokes to unlatch the first one and lift it down. We're about to start mounting up the truck, when Stan Harris stops us with a look that could kill.

He's staring into the nearest truck with eyes like murder. 'Fucking Guards sergeants ... So, tell me: who's forgotten the fucking tea urns?'

The PF Platoon Sergeant has got lock-on with Pete already. On the one hand I feel sorry for him. But on the other, I know I'm going to have to give Pete a wide berth from now on. If you're mates with the guy who's got lock-on from the head DS, you'll likely get hit in the back blast.

'Staff!' Pete yells, acknowledging his failure to sort out the tea roster. He turns to Jez and Al. 'Lads, let's get the fucking urns sorted.'

Jez – 'The Colonel' – has already got his Bergen and dummy rifle loaded onto the four-tonner. He turns and makes a run for the cookhouse, but he's left his weapon lying where it is.

Stan Harris practically explodes. 'WHERE THE FUCK IS YOUR FUCKING WEAPON?'

Eyes bulging, Jez stops in his tracks. 'Staff!' He runs back, grabs his dummy SLR, and turns to go and fetch the tea urns.

'What's your fucking name?' Stan Harris barks after him.

'Rowlands, Staff.'

'Fucking *Rowlands*? Sounds like a poofy bloody officer's name!'

'Staff.'

No one is laughing. No fucking way. And no one answers back.

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All it takes is for one of the DS to decide he doesn't like you, and you'll get beasted half to death by the lot of them.

Jez returns with a tea urn under one arm and his rifle under the other. We mount up the four-tonners. As Jez climbs aboard he's got a box of sugar and a carton of milk balanced on top of the tea urn. Predictably, the whole lot goes over.

Luckily, the milk's unopened, but the sugar ends up scattered all over the bed of the truck. Before the DS can notice Pete scoops it up as best he can and throws it into the tea urn, presumably working on the assumption that the mud and grit will sink to the bottom, whereas the sugar will dissolve.

'Fucking hell, lads,' he hisses, 'use your fucking heads. Don't bring the fucking sugar and the urn separate. Dump it into the urn back in the cookhouse, and bring it like that. Otherwise, it'll keep getting knocked over and we'll keep having shit in our tea.'

I take my place on the hard wooden bench by the rear of the truck, so I can keep a check on where we're going. I quickly realise my mistake. As soon as we're under way the wind starts whistling in through the open canvas back, and it's freezing.

There's a heavy, oppressive silence as the four-tonner trundles along this narrow country lane. No one's chatting now and there's zero crack.

It's day one of PF selection, and we know we're going to get thrashed.

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