

# ALMOST

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## CHAPTER ONE

### MISSION ONE

Captain Nelson's phone rang as he sat on the tarmac at O'Hare International Airport. The ring tone told him which phone to pick up; "Probably trouble" he thought to himself. He grabbed his secure phone and viewed the screen; a call at mission's end is never good news. Why had his military transport landed at a commercial airport? He reviewed the encrypted message: Nelson and his team, Alpha, were being rerouted to Fort Belvoir via an V22 Osprey from the 12th Aviation Battalion. That plane had been dispatched for his thirteen-member team that had just landed at O'Hare. Alpha team would be met at the gate as they stepped off the plane. The call ordered Nelson to follow the uniformed escorts. That was all the message said. This would be his team's third OP in the last 75 days. After gathering their gear, the escorts lead them through TSA security zones to a remote gate with a lone Osprey sitting outside. Looks of surprise greeted the soldiers in combat fatigues being escorted past crowded commercial terminals, to a military plane outside the gate of a commercial airport. And so, it began.

Five hours later, Nelson sat in an underground bunker at Fort Belvoir North, off the I-495 beltway just outside of Washington D.C. He listened to a brief explanation. It was now 10:30 PM; they had just been informed that a military transport would be immediately flying them to Elgin AF Base, Florida. They would sleep on route and reassembled in their OP building in Florida. Captain Nelson wrote a letter to his wife Nina, hoping it would be returned to him when he disembarked again on U.S. soil. Like all MARSOC members, letters and any personal belongings would be held pending their safe return. His team members wrote to loved ones as well; no email or calls or text messages were permitted from this moment going forward.

For the last six years, Nelson had spent more time away from home than with his wife, Nina, and the life that they had in their home outside of Indian Head, MD. Nina was an occupational rehab nurse at the VA Medical Center, Washington, DC. Eighteen months ago, Nelson and Nina met in an Arlington pub. Six months later they had fallen in love. She had seen the products of war, treating combatants injured both physically and mentally. They married five months later and during the last year, when he was not deployed, he worked on the rustic cabin that the previous owner had designed and built for himself, but never quite finished. Their new home, with views of the Potomac River, was now almost complete. Nelson had added underground wiring, new utilities, and added a washer, dryer, oven and refrigerator. He had saved most of his paychecks by avoiding overspending on the late-night drinking with his team. Their lofted one-bedroom home was a 1300 sq. foot, by a dreamland for both. It was theirs and the Bayport Credit Union, if they made another 232 payments. He looked down at his hands that had signs of the hammering and sawing. Signs that he had undertaken grueling work during the days spent together before his last mission. Nelson longed for time with Nina, starting their family and putting an end to his military life. For the moment, she had accepted Andrew's military career and had committed to be with him to the end. Nina would live on with that dream.

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

The mood in their Op's center changed when Colonel Jason Hahn arrived. Each member saluted the Colonel and gave full attention to his voice; what they would do next could affect events around the world; stealth was always paramount with MARSOC. Colonel Hahn had the operational plan handed out; everyone would now know the objectives and contingencies.

In thirty-six hours, each of three teams of thirteen MARSOC members were to night parachute into Ethiopian airspace. They would then work only in darkness and enter western Somalia to begin their

mission. The team's overall objectives were to assist a fragile government and help end the unrest that plagued Somalia, as it struggled to establish a central government. In addition to the ISIL and al-Shabaab insurgency, a semi-autonomous Somaliland existed in the northwest areas with its own capital and a population of 3,500,000 residents within a 68,000 sq. miles area. Somaliland had claimed independence from Somalia but has not yet been recognized as an independent country, despite some foreign governments establishing embassy sites in the capital, Hargeisa. Nelson and the other team leaders were to be seven to nine kilometers apart from each other when they arrived in western Somalia. They would begin with one area established as Somaliland in the north and a second in the south called Somali. the southern country was where MARSOC would operate in. Each team had their own objective.

The overall mission to put an end to al-Shabaab, al-Qaida and ISIL within Somalia was not the first. Since 2010, U.S. forces had launched forty-seven attacks on al-Shabaab fighters killed three-hundred-thirty-six of their members, but the groups persisted.

Two other identical MARSOC teams landed ten miles north of Nelson's team. They were to eliminate or disrupt these groups to aid in stabilizing the existing government, while acting in a covert manner, keeping US interests dark. Its objective was for Somaliland to then take control of the lower portion of this area and create one central government. Although vastly outnumbered, the SOF members were the best trained in the world and had support of air and sea resources, if needed.

Ethiopia 2:00 A.M

The ninety degrees Fahrenheit temperature didn't enhance their welcome. Each member carried one hundred pounds of gear, including food and water. When that ran out, their team logistics specialists were to secure additional provisions; there was no predetermined exit time or location. Each team had two native Somalia resource members who had been promised US Green Cards. They had spent 18 months being vetted, trained, and received English instructions in exchange for being given a path to US citizenship.

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

Nelson's team, Alpha, was successfully on the ground. All members were accounted for with no injuries and equipment was fully functional. He reached Beta and X-Ray on the encrypted radio, and they too were ready. Objective One was a go: all three teams coordinated their eight-mile movement through the desert roads and dry streambeds until they were two-miles outside of Arba Minch, Ethiopia. OPs at Elgin had given them three locations to secure ground transportation. After a five-hour hunt, they found what passed for a supply of four-wheel drive Deluxe Toyota trucks- each about twenty years old, but practically new in this country. With less than the anticipated resistance, the teams fueled up and moved quietly to Dal Dal- an area just outside of Somalia's western border. There were no manned borders- just dirt roads and the route planned was to remain within Ethiopia as they traveled east. The US and the current Ethiopian government maintained a working relationship.

Three hours later, Nelson had his coms officer, Specialist Ray Dickson, contact Team Beta leader Brian and Team X-Ray leader Teddy to ask their status. There were no replies. One-hour later, still with no replies, Nelson had Dickson send a flash transmission to Elgin AF OPs. Nelson requested a drone flyover to pinpoint each team. The United States military has manpower and equipment in forty countries. Contact was made for Rosh Pinna airbase in Israel to support their mission via a Air Force RQ-4 Global Hawk which has a 12,000-mile range. and stay airborne for thirty hours.

Six hours later, all three teams located each other and were making progress toward the Dal Dal meet-up. It would take almost twelve hours to reach the Somalia border. The day was about to warm up. In addition, their water and food supplies were limited and securing potable water would become a premium.

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*Thank you for reading this chapter!*

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