
OPERATION DARK HEART

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

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THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS

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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 [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I went through training at the "Farm" [REDACTED]—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. I 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.

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Moving to Washington, D.C., in November '87, I joined the air force clandestine unit—the Air Force Special Activities Center (AF-SAC). I went through training at the "Farm" at Camp Peary—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. I 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 six months 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.

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of their weapons systems. The typhoon gusts buffeted the soldiers now crouching in the shadows of the ridge, preparing for their rapid move into the relative warmth of the belly of the CH-47s. Hours of orders, preparation, and synchronization came down to this moment. Men and machine became one, lifted into the beginning of a late-summer Afghani dawn.

The sixty-mile movement to the LZ near Deh Chopan was swift, less than an hour from one LZ to another, even with a circuitous route designed to throw off anyone from knowing exactly where the assault force was headed.

A small Special Forces team prepared the LZ northwest of Deh Chopan, and readied to receive the inbound 10th Mountain troops.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] As the troops came off the Chinooks, they would be led into the short hills that lined the valley just to the northwest of Deh Chopan.

The three helicopters were on the ground for less than five minutes depositing the majority of the two companies. One lifted off still carrying a reinforced squad of soldiers that would be deposited near a blocking position, just to the east of the still sleeping village, to obstruct the road and the possible arrival of reinforcements.

The sky was almost a blue and burnt orange as the sun moved over the eastern mountains. The soldiers would have checked their weapons, conducted final rehearsals, and then found quiet places to break into groups and eat their MREs for breakfast. Officers and senior NCOs in their newly established makeshift command posts reviewed maps, now in the daylight, one last time, and finalized their attack plans and synchronized troop movements. Within an hour, the troops would be on the march toward the village in overwatch formation, with scouts and snipers a good half klick out ahead.

The stage was now set, and all indications were that the move had been made without observation by the Taliban. It appeared that the cavalry would at least be in the game. Now we'd see if they could get

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A small Special Forces team prepared the LZ northwest of Deh Chopan, and readied to receive the inbound 10th Mountain troops. Dawn was an awkward time of day when night-vision goggles were not effective, and it was hard to distinguish anything more than gray and purple shapes. As the troops came off the Chinooks, they would be led into the short hills that lined the valley just to the northwest of Deh Chopan.

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had some upcoming issues in my personal life. Rina and I had agreed to spend some time together over the holidays and see if anything was still there. Rina. She was such a free spirit. She'd had her doubts about settling down. When it came to kids, I wanted more; she wasn't sure. Despite that, we decided to try our relationship again. She had put together a dynamite trip to New York City: to hang out in Chinatown for a few days, then on to a remote bed-and-breakfast in upstate New York afterward. One-on-one time would do us good . . . or bad . . . one way or another, time would serve as a catalyst to answer the question of our future.

Then there was Kate. We spent my last night in Afghanistan together at the Safe House. No sleep. No sex. We just lay awake and held each other. Just as the first gray rays of light crept to the top of the window, came the unforgettable, haunting call to prayer from the mosque across the street from the House. Both of us knew this was coming to an end, and that real life was about to return.

I felt changed, from the inside out. I was finally able to accept myself for who I was. Maybe it was because I'd never known my real dad that I had kept trying to prove I was a man with high-risk behaviors—always thinking that if I survived, I must be worthy and a good guy. The ghosts that had chased me and pushed me to “prove” my worth were gone. Maybe it was the first time I felt complex. I was more flexible—and less fearful—dealing with life.

I went through the CIA pipeline to get back to the States, flying on a [REDACTED]-chartered flight from [REDACTED]. DoD case officers were allowed to travel there to decompress during our tour, but I'd never taken them up on it. There were troops in Afghanistan for a full year. If I was there only six months, why should I get R&R and not them? Didn't make much sense.

As I looked out the window of the Bombardier turboprop aircraft, my mind still going at 100 miles an hour, I kept thinking about Dark Heart. If I went back to Afghanistan, I might be able to influence events so that they led more in that direction in '04. [REDACTED]

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I went through the CIA pipeline to get back to the States, flying on a Blackwater-chartered flight from Kabul to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. DoD case officers were allowed to travel there to decompress during our tour, but I'd never taken them up on it. There were troops in Afghanistan for a full year. If I was there only six months, why should I get R&R and not them? Didn't make much sense.

As I looked out the window of the Bombardier turboprop aircraft, my mind still going at 100 miles an hour, I kept thinking about Dark Heart. If I went back to Afghanistan, I might be able to influence events so that they led more in that direction in '04. Back at Clarendon, I did my doc swap and returned to Tony Shaffer. Always a strange

DARKNESS FALLS

IT was Friday night, well after close of business, by the time I got to my home, [REDACTED] I could get into the [REDACTED] Whatever the Inspector General had come up with, it couldn't be much. I'd always played it straight. Yes, I pushed the envelope and behaved obnoxiously at times to paper-pushing bureaucrats, but they can't fire you for finding ways to get your job done.

In fact, I'd been told by one of the senior staff who was aware of the investigation's results that they were just going to fire a shot over my bow now that my two protectors—DIA Director Lt. Gen. Pat Hughes and DIA Director for Operations Maj. Gen. Bob Harding—were gone. I figured the worst they could do to me was a letter of reprimand.

First thing Monday morning, I headed over to DIA headquarters, leaving my equipment, [REDACTED] at home. I figured I'd turn them in later. As usual,

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IT was Friday night, well after close of business, by the time I got to my home, so I stayed in alias over the weekend until I could get into the office and swap my documents. Whatever the Inspector General had come up with, it couldn't be much. I'd always played it straight. Yes, I pushed the envelope and behaved obnoxiously at times to paper-pushing bureaucrats, but they can't fire you for finding ways to get your job done.

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First thing Monday morning, I headed over to DIA headquarters, leaving my equipment, including four Iridium phones with a top-secret crypto key, at home. I figured I'd turn them in later. As usual, when I got to Clarendon, I called upstairs to the cover staff and told