The riveting account of an Army Ranger's odyssey through years of grueling service in the mostly unknown and unseen world of military special operations. This telling details the intensive training and sacrifice of America’s secret warriors.

Black Chinook - An Army Ranger's Story

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Chapter 1
In The Beginning

When I was seven years old, my family moved from Minneapolis to the town of Cresco in northeast Iowa. I primarily grew up on a farm and over the years spent countless days in the woods by myself tracking deer and imagining life as a mountain man. My only diversion from the farm was school and playing football. From football I learned the value of teamwork, and I enjoyed the violent competition. These lessons were utterly invaluable in the preparation for everything to come in my life. I remember my High School football coach, Bill Kosters, saying one day outside of the weight room, "You guy's have got to be tough; it's just like if you have to go to war someday; you have to step up." I did not realize how prophetic those words would be.

After graduating from Northeast Missouri State University in Kirksville, in May of 1985, I skipped the graduation, and headed home to the farm. I had a Bachelor of Science Degree to my credit and was determined to land a job as soon as possible. I sent out twenty resumes and soon had an interview scheduled with a major agricultural firm, Pioneer Seed Corn. I arrived at the interview early, looked good, and felt confident a job would be mine in short fashion. The interviewer began by saying, "I see it took you five years to get your degree and your GPA dropped from 3.45 to 2.66. How do you explain that?" At that point, I knew the interview was not looking good.

During my senior year of college, a series of events occurred which altered my plans for the rest of my life. I had religiously watched the coverage of the Grenada Invasion on the television. I listened intently to the accounts of Army Rangers parachuting

onto the island. A television documentary on Ranger training aired that same week and whetted my appetite even more. Later, my dad mentioned one of my uncles had been a Ranger in WWII and had participated in a raid on a prison camp. Then the movie *Red Dawn* found its way into the house and pushed me over the edge. My interest in joining the Army had peaked. The time was right and I just needed to take the step and get on with it.

I walked into the nearest Army Recruiting Office in Decorah, Iowa, and said I wanted to be an Army Ranger. Sergeant First Class Dennis Landis sat behind his desk, raised an eyebrow, and had me fill out a questionnaire. As he picked up the completed questionnaire, his eyebrow raised again. He obviously felt he had hit the jackpot. I was a college graduate in good shape who wanted to enlist as soon as possible.

Two days later I was on my way to Fort Des Moines, to an Army Reception Station, to determine my options for a military specialty. I took the Army Skills Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), used to determine your potential to succeed in a variety of army Military Occupational Specialties. I scored 123 out of a possible 130 points and was informed my score was well beyond the 110 points required to qualify for any job in the Army. I then awaited my turn in front of the computer which listed the available Army jobs.

The recruiter said, "Sorry bud, there are no Ranger slots open. How about something else?" I think they saw me as overconfident as I had specifically asked for a Ranger slot and they thought I was full of myself. After all, I was just another guy off the block wanting to join the Army.

I replied, "No deal. It's Ranger or nothing!" I was intent on finding something special or nothing at all. Nothing of interest was offered and I was excused to a waiting room. Thirty minutes later, a tall Non-Commissioned Officer came to the

waiting room and said he had something to show me. "How about being a Ranger Fire Support Specialist?" he said.

I asked, "A what?"

He told me to look at a television screen and clicked in a VCR tape. Soon a film started which showed a M577 Command Post armored vehicle running around the countryside and setting up antennas.

"Is that in a Ranger Battalion?" I asked.

He answered, "Yep, you go to Basic Training, Advanced Individual Training, Airborne School, and then straight to the Rangers."

"I'll take it!" I would be required to sign a four year contract as an Unassigned Ranger. I would not know until after six months into the training what my final destination would be. I did know it would be in the 75th Ranger Regiment—that was all I cared about. If I failed at any step of the training process, I would be subject to worldwide reassignment at the needs of the Army.

Looking back, it was apparent the recruiters at the Reception Station had no idea what they were talking about when it came to the Ranger Battalions. By sheer accident I got the job I wanted from watching a bogus tape. Over the years to come, a lack of military and public knowledge in the Ranger Regiment would be reinforced time and again.

My plans upset my parents. Florian (Bud) and Terri Combs were extremely hardworking mid-western conservative folks who saw politics and world events from a very practical perspective. The military had been a huge part of my family and had captured my imagination during my childhood. My Uncle Jim Kautz was in France in World War I and during one visit to his farm he showed me a picture of himself in the trenches. During WWII my father served proudly in the Navy in the Pacific theater on LCS 113. My mother had four brothers

and a sister in the various services at one time. I still think of my Uncle Stan Sidla who was a Marine in the Pacific and fought a little known battle to hold a hilltop. I heard that story so many times as a child that I could close my eyes and *see* him shooting savagely at waves of attacking Japanese. Later he would crawl down among the bodies to rummage for ammunition and water to last until relief finally came days later. My Uncle Stan Sidla survived the ordeal and was decorated for the action.

At the back of the family Shoe Store my dad sat down with me and carefully explained his reservations about my choice to join the Army. As my mother listened from the next room, he sat with a pencil in his right hand and looked me directly in the eye as I sat on a chair to his left. To this day I can remember his words. "David, no father hopes to see his son go off to war or to make a career out of killing people. I felt I went to war so my sons would not have to." He also explained that our family had always served, but the only way he could see it supporting a future for my family was to someday become an officer. I listened intently to what my father said, but I told him my decision had been made—I was joining the Army. From that point on my parents supported me one-hundred percent and consistently wrote me wherever my service took me.

Once my plans were settled, I informed my buddy Doug Fenske. Doug had been working at a local trailer factory and decided to enlist also. At the time, the Army offered a buddy program where two friends could join together and stay together through Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training. So that was it, and we joined on the buddy system for four years of adventure as Army Rangers.

* * *

Army Green. Doug and I arrived at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, on 24 August 1985. We carried our bags through the stifling heat and moved into the Reception Station with around 200 new recruits from across the nation. This diverse group of men would affect my life for the next three months. We would eat, sleep, sweat, and train as a team to become soldiers. At the time, the experience of Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training was an unknown and therefore a big challenge. In retrospect, what had been challenging and stressful only gave us the minimum preparedness for life as a truly professional soldier. For most soldiers it was the most demanding and shocking experience of their lives. For Doug and me it was the first step in a long road of training to reach our final goal of becoming Army Rangers.

As we poured out the doors of the "cattle car," Drill Sergeants with round brimmed hats greeted us with incoherent screams. We were made to do pushups and mountain climbers in the street and on the sidewalk to create confusion. The Drill Sergeants wanted to see how we would react. As others got tired and reached muscle failure, I continued to knock out pushups and do mountain climbers in a big pool of my own sweat. Finally, a Drill Sergeant commanded, "A'ten … shun!" I popped up and stood still as a rock and stared straight ahead. I had actually practiced this in the mirror at the shoe store. Drill Sergeants were saying intimidating things into my ear but I remained solid. They were also sizing me up. Prior to my arrival at basic training I had been on a beer and pizza diet mixed in with lifting weights. Due to my size and my age I must have made a good impression. I heard a voice say, "Where is he going?"
Another voice answered, "Fourth platoon."

Then Drill Sergeant, Sergeant First Class Winisko, appeared in front of me, looked me in the eye, and told me I would be his Platoon Guide. I had no idea what that meant. Sergeant First Class Winisko explained. I would be in charge of carrying out his guidance and direction to the rest of the platoon of 34 soldiers. It was my job to make sure all tasks were accomplished to standard and I would be the focal point for retribution.

It became obvious that recruits were affected differently based on the environment they had come from. Basic Training had the greatest effect upon the young soldier who did not have a respect for authority. That type of individual got "special" attention and had a rough experience. Under constant scrutiny by our Drill Sergeants, the slightest error by anyone within the platoon resulted in group physical suffering. Peer pressure was intense and infighting and bickering common.

Regardless of how much help some soldiers received, they always seemed to be substandard and the entire group paid the price. Many times soldiers asked me if they could do a "blanket party" on an individual. A "blanket party" consisted of a group attacking a soldier when he was asleep, holding him down, and beating the crap out of him. The "party" sent the message that the platoon was sick and tired of paying the price for his shortcomings. I was the Platoon Guide, older and bigger, and therefore I guess any clearance for that action had to come through me. There were certainly a couple of soldiers that irritated me, but in reality no one had deserved such treatment. In the end, there were no actual blanket parties in my platoon. We did have to physically impress upon two of our soldiers that they couldn't get away with smoking in the latrine or not keeping themselves clean. I never understood how someone could not know their body was nasty to the point they grossed out everyone else. It was made clear to clean yourself or the

platoon would ensure you did. That option would not be comfortable.

During our training at Fort Sill, the Drill Sergeants were very professional, and I had the utmost respect for their experience and their dedication to the task of training us. Under their mentorship we worked as a team to become stronger physically, learn our weapons and equipment, and acquire the discipline required of professional soldiers. The group worked well together and some of the weaker soldiers made great strides in improving themselves. Before we knew it, Basic Training was over and we began the Advanced Individual Training (AIT). During this phase we learned twenty-percent of our basic job. We would all be trained as 13F (thirteen fox) Forward Observers. We would be responsible for calling and adjusting all forms of fire support: artillery, mortar, naval gunfire, close-air support and attack helicopters.

During AIT there was a shift to a more academic environment. We spent long hours in Snow Hall learning how to call for and adjust artillery fire and to operate communications equipment. These skills would be our bread and butter. We also honed basic skills like land navigation and rappelling. AIT was not hard, but sometimes I was just too smart (or dumb) for my own good. I asked questions that would make the instructor stop and look at me with a puzzled gaze. I was just trying to figure out *why* we did it that way.

Looking back years later after training countless Forward Observers myself, I can see their frustration. There are some procedures that are just executed. To explain *why* required an understanding of all phases of artillery. Most Non-Commissioned Officers were experts in one of the three phases of artillery. Usually only Commissioned Officers were trained in all three phases. The course climaxed with a live-fire

demonstration and the graded adjustment of live artillery rounds.

Before we knew it, it was time to move on. The members of our platoon were scattered across the Army. Each of us had a different idea of what we expected to accomplish in the military. Many soldiers were in the Army to collect college money, fulfill their Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC) or West Point commitment, or to find occupational security with the least amount of discomfort. There were places within the military to accommodate those soldiers. There were also units where the adventurous could go to test their metal.

* * *

Storm Troopers. Doug and I left Ft. Sill and on a clear and cool day in December 1985. After a flight connection in St. Louis, we arrived in Columbus, Georgia. We gathered our checked baggage, loaded into a taxi, and drove twenty minutes to Fort Benning, the home of the U.S. Army Airborne School. The weather was similar to Oklahoma and the smell of the pine forests was in the air.

On the first day of training we received an orientation brief from the Airborne School Company Commander. He addressed the entire class of over three hundred assembled soldiers: "Airborne candidates! Look at the man to your left … look at the man to your right. Fifty percent of you will not be here for graduation day. Some of you will get hurt. Some of you will quit. That's just the way it is."

Airborne School is a threshold within the Army which makes every Airborne candidate feel like they are a part of something special—a cut above the average "leg" soldier. There is nothing wrong with a soldier who elected to avoid the airborne option. Mechanized infantry and armor units are powerful and proven

killing forces with colorful and proud heritages. However, it is the fact that as an individual, you have taken a step to go above and beyond that makes you feel special.

Each Airborne candidate felt a nervous energy because he had challenged himself and taken the risk to fail or succeed. Failure could result in embarrassment as you attempted to explain failure to your family and unit. However, success injected each new paratrooper with confidence and pride. They had earned the right to join the ranks of a proud lineage of paratroopers.

The course was broken into three phases: Ground Week, Tower Week and Jump Week. The phases progressed in difficulty to give a thorough orientation to your equipment, landing techniques, parachute control techniques, actions in the air and in the aircraft, and exiting the aircraft. The focus was on attention to detail and the safe conduct of airborne operations.

I'll never forget my first five parachute jumps at 1,200 feet. The first was from a C-130 Hercules, a four engine propeller airplane, and the remaining four from a C-141 Starlifter, a four engine larger jet plane. At the time these were the work horses of the Air Force. As I sat in the aircraft and it began its run down the runway, I was filled with nervous anticipation. My stomach let me know that all the trash talk in the world didn't mean a thing now. It was a short and direct flight to Fryar Drop Zone on the Alabama side of Ft. Benning. Sooner than expected, the Jumpmaster began his series of jump commands. "Stand Up, Hook Up, Check Equipment and Sound Off for Equipment Check." These commands got all jumpers on their feet, hooked up and ready to exit the aircraft. "Stand By ... GO!"

Every paratrooper looking out that door at the ground far below felt a slight pause in his feet. Then the mind willed the body to exit that door into nothingness. For four long seconds

your body was blasted by wind and floating in weightlessness. Suddenly a sharp tug on the back, followed by a groin-wrenching stop, let you know your parachute canopy has deployed. Now you floated toward a controlled collision with the ground.

The horror stories told about the Airborne School are somewhat overblown, with the exaggeration depending on how much of a challenge it was to the individual. To me it was no more than a structured environment where a minimal amount of Physical Training (PT), combined with many hours of instruction, prepared you for your first jump from a perfectly good airplane. Considerable embellishment surrounded the Gig Pit in particular. Every student who had a deficiency in performance, conduct, or uniform quality (spit shined boots and pressed uniform) did not meet the standards and was therefore given a gig. That gig was a mandatory free pass to the Gig Pit where tough and punishing PT would take place. It was no big deal and most airborne candidates in the pit actually enjoyed the chance to have a change in the PT routine.

The course lasted for three weeks, culminating with your fifth static line parachute jump and the awarding of your Silver Basic Parachutist Wings. The awarding of the wings took place on the drop zone after the final jump and the procedure was very simple. The wings were pounded against your chest to make the pins on the back puncture your skin. This left two perfect holes oozing blood onto your shirt. Hence the affectionate term of blood wings—every paratrooper's proudest moment.

The Company Commander's prediction had held true. Fifty percent of the students were all that remained for graduation. The other fifty percent failed for a variety of reasons: quitting, lack of nerves, injury, safety violations, or not being able to complete the runs to standard.

* * *

Black Chinook. That afternoon when many soldiers were headed off to other posts around the world, two Ranger Non-Commissioned Officers arrived at the Airborne School. They were to escort 124 of us to the Ranger Indoctrination Program (RIP) barracks. It was immediately apparent that the Ranger Battalion was a special place. These two NCOs looked sharp and imposing as they stood with their starched jungle fatigues, highly polished jungle boots, shaved heads and coveted black berets—impeccable—professional.

We ran the half-mile to the RIP compound, and for the next three weeks had to prove our worth to the Ranger Regiment. It was made crystal clear the Regiment did not want anything but the best soldiers. It was perfectly acceptable for each and every candidate in the class to fail.

For the next three weeks we endured long hours of Physical Training, hand-to-hand combat, swim tests, road marches, land navigation, parachute jumps, and patrolling through the back woods of Fort Benning. We listened to many accounts of Ranger heroism and sacrifice from past deeds and it set the tone for what we could expect when we arrived at a Ranger Battalion.

The Ranger lineage is steeped in a colorful history and has set the standard for the Rangers of today. Major Robert Rogers Standing Orders from the French and Indian Wars are a cornerstone of every Ranger Handbook and still fundamentally applicable.

Rogers' Rangers Standing Orders

1. Don't forget nothing.

2. Have your musket clean as a whistle, hatchet scoured, sixty rounds powder and ball, and be ready to march at a minutes warning.
3. When you're on the march, act the way you would if you was sneaking up on a deer. See the enemy first.
4. Tell the truth about what you see and what you do. There is an army depending on us for correct information. You can lie all you please when you tell other folks about the Rangers, but don't ever lie to a Ranger or an officer.
5. Don't ever take a chance you don't have to.
6. When you're on the march we march as a single file, far enough apart so one shot can't go thru two men.
7. If we strike swamps, or soft ground, we spread out abreast, so it's hard to track us.
8. When we march, we keep moving 'til dark, so as to give the enemy the least chance at us.
9. When we camp, half the party stays awake while the other half sleeps.
10. If we take prisoners, we keep 'em separate 'til we have had time to examine them, they can cook up a story between 'em.
11. Don't ever march the same way. Take a different route so you won't be ambushed.
12. No matter whether we travel in big parties or little ones, each party has to keep a scout 20 yards ahead, 20 yards on each flank and 20 yards in the rear, so the main body can't be surprised and wiped out.
13. Every night you'll be told where to meet if surrounded by a superior force. 14. Don't sit down to eat without posting sentries. Don't sleep beyond dawn. Dawn's when the French and Indians attack.
14. Don't cross a river by a regular ford.

15. If somebody's trailing you, make a circle, come back onto your own tracks, and ambush the folks that aim to ambush you.
16. Don't stand up when the enemy's coming against you. Kneel down, lie down, or hide behind a tree.
17. Let the enemy come 'til he's almost close enough to touch. Then let him have it and jump out and finish him with you hatchet.

Major Robert Rogers,
1759

The training was intense and kept the pressure on all Ranger candidates to rise to the occasion or terminate themselves. Each task was new and increased the level of pain based tolerance each candidate could endure of overcome. I'll never forget doing the water confidence course at Victory pond in February. There was ice around the edges of the pond and freezing temperatures in general. The confidence course consisted of the 15-meter swim, log walk, rope drop and slide for life, in that order.

When it was my turn, I jumped backwards off the bank into the water and momentarily went completely under the surface. When I bobbed to the top, I'm sure my lips were already blue—it was freezing! As I struggled to catch my breath, I swam hard with my weapon, LBE (equipment belt of ammo pouches, full canteens and compass), uniform and boots. Before I could get to the end, my legs became so cold that I started to cramp up. I made a few last hard pulls with my arms and reached the ladder. I handed up the equipment and to other was pulled from the water by two other Ranger candidates.

I heard someone yell, "Keep Moving Ranger!" and I headed off to the log walk, rope drop and slide for life. I ran to the log

walk, climbed the ladder and walked across the thirty-foot beam suspended twenty feet above the water. At the end of the beam, I grabbed a taut horizontal rope, climbed twenty feet out onto it, and slapped a RANGER sign. After slapping the sign, I let myself hang and then fall the twenty foot distance into the water. I quickly swam to the shore, and then ran to the slide for life.

The "slide for life" consisted of climbing forty feet up a ladder into a tower, grabbing a set of handles attached to a pulley, and then riding the pulley down a diagonal cable to the water below. Before you got to the end you had to let go of the handles and crash into the water. As I grabbed the handles with my wet and sandy hands, I remember thinking that it would suck to fall off.

As the weeks went by in the Ranger Indoctrination Program, the pressure increased. Soldiers voluntarily terminated in small groups as they lost their nerve or were injured in training. That was a lesson to be learned—no quitter wanted to "go" alone. They always wanted to take someone else with them. The fear of not completing the course was real for everyone who coveted their black beret. No one wanted to fail and have to explain to their friends and family why they couldn't make the grade.

Two Non-Commissioned Officers were extremely memorable. Staff Sergeant Lowe was a guy continually sneaking up on candidates and jumping them when their guard was down. I was on barracks guard late one night and stopped in the latrine to relieve myself. I thought I heard something but dismissed it because it was so faint. As I walked out of the latrine, something made me throw my hand up and I caught Staff Sergeant Lowe's hand an inch from my face. He let me know I had failed my mission and that the lives of everyone sleeping in the barracks had been compromised because of my error. That lesson has stuck with me to this day. Execute every

mission, no matter how menial it seems to you, to the best of your ability.

Staff Sergeant Scircca was an Arian-looking dude with a bad attitude who had won the Best Ranger Competition the year before. He was extremely physical and enjoyed coming into the compound at odd hours to inflict as much pain on the candidates as he could through exercise. He claimed to be a Druid and Satan worshipper. I heard him ask a student one day, "What do you get from God that I don't get from Satan?"

Staff Sergeant Scircca was also in charge of the "Death Doll." It was the doll of bad luck that one of the candidates had to carry on a night combat equipment parachute jump. They gave the doll to a student named Trammel. Trammel was a little guy who had endured more than his share of harassment because of his size. Sure enough, as soon as the doors to the plane opened Trammel's reserve parachute activated and started to snake towards the door. This was the worst possible scenario for a jumper in the airplane. If the parachute got out the door, the wind could catch it and violently extract the jumper and anything in his path from the airplane. Nearby Rangers dove on the parachute and saved Trammel from this fate. The legend of the death doll lived on.

Early one morning Staff Sergeant Lowe loaded us onto a "cattle car" and we headed to the backside of Ft. Benning for a week of field training. There we practiced patrolling, ambushes, and raids to learn the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). We would be expected to know how to execute these drills when we arrived at our assigned Ranger Battalion. This was also our first indoctrination into what it was like to be cold in Ranger style.

As soon as we arrived, it began to rain and the temperatures continued to drop throughout the day. Late in the afternoon snow flakes started to fall. Some of the cadre had been late and

SSG Lowe wanted to move out and execute some counter-tracking measures to see if the other cadre could trail us. We moved by walking only in running streams and creek beds. If we crossed a road, each man walked in the same tracks to leave no clue as to how many men had passed.

With light snow in the air and soaked to the bone, we crossed chest deep creeks and moved like ghosts through the woods. The conditions were terrible. The men were frozen and shivering so hard that it was difficult to whisper. Believe it or not, we loved every minute of it!

That evening we moved into a perimeter for the night and made three-man buddy teams with which to rotate thirty-three percent security. At any one time at least one of the three had to be alert and pulling security duty. We were warned that the cadre would attempt to get into the perimeter during the night and take out the command post in the middle. The threat was simple. If they succeeded, we would pay in pain and sweat.

The night was bitter cold to our wet bodies and all we had was our poncho and poncho liners to stay warm. There was no such thing as a sleeping bag. For years I thought they were only issued in basic training. We used the one basic tool we had available to us to stay warm and used it well—pushups. I did not sleep one wink that night and if I didn't do a few thousand pushups I would be surprised. Regardless of our effort, we heard a loud explosion to our rear as an artillery simulator destroyed the command post. There was no reason to worry about staying warm anymore because we got the promised penalty for failure.

We started the Ranger Indoctrination Program with 124 candidates and graduated 34. I graduated number two in my class behind a guy named Neil Reilly. Each of us had to recite a stanza of the Ranger Creed and the one who did it better would be the Honor Graduate. I botched it up and Neil got the prize.

This was the end of six months of continuous training that culminated with the opportunity to serve in the 75th Ranger Regiment. We had earned the right to wear the coveted black beret and basked in the moment. After graduation, nine of us loaded up for the ride over to the 3/75 Ranger Battalion compound, at the Harmony Church area of Fort Benning. Doug and I arrived on 22 February 1986.

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