OPERATION DARK HEART

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

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Fort—NSA headquarters at Fort Meade, Md.

FRAGO—fragmentary order

G2—army director of intelligence

HIG—Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin—terrorist group founded by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

HOC—HUMINT Operations Center

HQ—Headquarters

HSD—HUMINT Support Detachment

HSE—HUMINT Support Element

HUMINT—Human Intelligence

HVT—High Value Target

ID—identification; identify

IG—Inspector General

INSCOM—Army Intelligence and Security Command

IRGC—Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

ISAF—International Security Assistance Force

ISI—Pakistani Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence

J2—senior intelligence officer, joint staff

J3—director for operations, joint staff

JDAMs—Joint direct attack munition

JSOC—Joint Special Operations Command

JSOTF—Joint Special Operations Task Force

JSTAR—airborne surveillance and target attack radar sytem

LIWA—Army's Land Information Warfare Activity

LTC—Leadership Training Cell

LZ—Landing Zone

MIDB—Military Intelligence Database

MP—military police

MRE—meal ready to eat

NCO—noncommissioned officer

NFN—National File Number

NIMA—National Imagery and Mapping Agency

NSA—National Security Agency

[redacted]

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OIC—Officer in Charge

ROE—Rules of Engagement

RPG—rocket-propelled grenade

SA-7—Soviet-made SAM (surface to air missile) a.k.a. GRAIL or Strela-2

SAW—Squad Automatic Weapon

SCIF—Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility

SF—Special Forces

SIGINT—Signals Intelligence

SOCOM—U.S. Special Operations Command

TAREX—TARget EXploitation. Small-unit, up-close, intelligence-gathering operatives. Usually two-to-three-man units

TOC—Tactical Operations Center

Voice-Sail—NSA nickname for intercept of wireless communications signals

VTC—video teleconferencing center in SCIF

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VTC—video teleconferencing center in SCIF

in their beams. There was a big, U-shaped conference table and various openings to other tents/offices off the main area.

The tents were insulated, air-conditioned, and heated, but still hot as hell in the summer and, I was to discover, damned cold in the winter. On windy days—which was most days in Bagram—the wind sucked and blew at the tent walls, flapping them with such force and volume that we often had to pause in meetings and wait for the gales to die down before resuming.

One of the first people we ran into was Lt. Gen. John Vines, commander of the U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan. Vines had assumed command of the Afghanistan operation in May, although he had been in country for nine months as commander of the 82nd Airborne Division. He was leaving the SCIF after his daily morning situation brief when Rich introduced us. Vines grabbed my hand for a swift, firm shake.

"Good to meet you, Major Stryker," he said. "Glad to have you here." My first impression was of a direct, no-nonsense leader.

Inside the SCIF, I started to meet members of the team I would be fighting this war with, starting with Navy Lt. Cmdr. David Weiding, chief of the National Security Agency's activities in Afghanistan.

"Welcome aboard, shipmate," he said, extending a hand. With satellites, bugs, receivers, antennas, and a bunch of other very classified signals intelligence (or SIGINT), Dave and his people kept an ear out for the bad guys from the air and from the ground. Lean and compact, blond and blue-eyed, Dave was the resident "lib" who became—despite his politics—one of my closest allies.

Because Dave had the appropriate clearances and background, I was able to tell him I'd worked with NSA on previous assignments, including a recent one in which an NSA guy was embedded in my unit to run cyber projects. Dave looked impressed and said he wanted to learn more about that operation.

The human intelligence tent where I would be working had a kind of a submarine feel to it—long and narrow, with a plywood floor and computers slapped down on long tables along the perimeter. Dust was

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Dave leaned forward again. Clearly, he'd been thinking about this for a while. "I understand that we're focusing on leadership targeting, but I'd like us to work together to provide actionable intelligence to the 10th Mountain so they can more effectively counter the offensive."

"What do you have in mind?" I asked, now sitting with all four chair legs on the floor and paying close attention.

"I'd like us to combine intel for the effort," said Dave.

Whoa. This was radical. There are huge ownership issues over intel. Intelligence agencies like to keep their info in silos, send it in for analysis, and treat it as proprietary. At the Fort (the NSA headquarters at Fort Meade, Maryland,) analysts normally do triage and give you back what they think you need—and you never get everything.

"You want our raw source info?" I wanted to make sure I knew what he was requesting.

"Well," Dave said carefully, "it would be useful. We could infuse the data for any known terrorist, warlord, or enabler—anything you have."

I thought hard, putting my hand to my forehead. "I don't think the people in my organization are gonna like that very much." *No kidding*, I thought. *They'll go ballistic.*

Our reports were written without the exact source of the info to protect that source. We separated out the chaff and gave out just the kernel. However, the details related to sourcing were hugely important to understanding the big picture.

"It would have to stay within the holdings of the LTC. No Kiwis," I said. New Zealand Defence Force troops were providing intelligence, as well as combat support, as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in the country.

Dave nodded. "In exchange, I will make sure you get immediate coverage or answers we can pull directly from our access to raw SIGINT. We would use the combined data to put together a package on each guy. Then decisions could be made jointly." For Dave, that

"WE WILL KILL THE INFIDELS" 55

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meant details of when the bad guys were talking to each other, how often, and where they were talking from, a kinda "friends and family" network for terrorists. The phone numbers they were using, when combined with our HUMINT data, were hugely important to understanding the operational environment—the "spiderweb" of the terrorist infrastructure that we had to understand so we could act in a smart, cohesive fashion.

For Dave to offer to distribute raw data outside the NSA system, even though it would remain within the top secret security network, was also a radical move. Normally, the Fort got the raw, unanalyzed intercepts first and then they gave people like Dave what they thought he needed in the form of finished or near finished reports, but Dave had cut a deal with them. He was getting everything so that his hybrid team of New Zealand and U.S. SIGINT specialists could parse it and review it to establish their own intel. In promising me access to their intercepts, Dave was stepping way, way, way out on a limb.

In my mind, I could just hear the screaming in Clarendon (DIA Operations Support Center) and at the Fort (Fort Meade, Maryland, NSA HQ) if they knew about this level of information exchange.

"Where do you propose to keep it?" I asked. The fact was, our computer systems were incompatible, so we had no way to create a shared database. We would literally have to print out everything.

"I'm going to put them on my door," Dave said.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, *that's* secure."

"We're in a SCIF. We're fine," Dave said, "and we need to have one central location that has one hard copy of all the information on any single target. When we decide to take action, we pull the target package down and we start looking at it as a team. Together, we make a decision on a course of action: kill, capture, or do nothing."

Kill, capture, or spy: that was the accepted equation of the new math that we dealt with every day. The temptation was always to kill, but actually it's better first to spy. Guys on phones were always great sources of intel, so you had to perform a gain-loss evaluation of potentially losing that intel. If you spy on a bad guy and he gives you

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Task Force 121 began arriving in Afghanistan with a vengeance. It had the best technology, the best weapons, the best people—and plenty of money to burn. I had worked with 121's parent element for years, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). As the cutting edge of SOCOM and, in reality, the whole Department of Defense, JSOC was always ready to jump in and perform the nation's most sensitive, high-risk missions—and had generally done them well.

JSOC grew out of the screwups of the 1980 Iranian hostage crisis and the failures at "Desert One"—the staging area that was supposed to be used for an assault into Tehran to liberate the American hostages held there. The debacle at Desert One was attributed to our lack of a standing, well-funded, well-trained, mission-ready, cutting-edge Special Forces unit ready to jump into any crisis anywhere on the planet. JSOC and its "task forces" were the answer to that need.

As 121 started to roll into Bagram, the very fabric of the base changed. It brought almost a surreal energy. At one point, fully loaded C-17 transport aircraft were landing at Bagram every thirty to forty-five minutes, spending about an hour off-loading and screaming rapidly back into the sky again. I could see pallet after pallet of material coming off the C-17s, neatly lined up and filled with enough high-tech gear to run a country.

The number of personnel swelled. While its predecessor unit, Task Force 5, had been a tight unit of some 200, Task Force 121 was going to have more than 2,000.

They set up their initial headquarters in the old Task Force 5 command center, but only temporarily. As their folks arrived, they tripled the size of the old TF 5 compound and built row after row of "B-Huts"—plywood buildings that could serve as anything from offices to sleeping quarters. Massive tents went up. As they unpacked and set up, tent after tent was filling with equipment and technology.

Task Force 121 had brought its A game.

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Task Force 1099 began arriving in Afghanistan with a vengeance. It had the best technology, the best weapons, the best people—and plenty of money to burn. I had worked with 1099's parent element for years. [redacted] As the cutting edge of SOCOM and, in reality, the whole Department of Defense. They were [redacted] always ready to jump in and perform the nation's most sensitive, high-risk missions—and had generally done them well.

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jeered at the aid workers for "living in luxury while our friends are in prison in Cuba."

Then Rumsfeld showed up in Kabul and appeared to be seriously delusional. He and Karzai claimed that the Taliban were no danger to the country.

"I've not seen any indication that the Taliban pose any military threat to the security of Afghanistan," Rumsfeld told reporters.

Wow, I remember thinking. *We must have just spent the last eight months chasing ghosts. . . .*

Karzai had drunk the Kool-Aid, too.

"The Taliban doesn't exist anymore," he claimed. "They're defeated. They're gone."

Yeah, right.

It was clear that the United States was conducting foreign policy by wishful thinking. Wish it and it would happen. Our intelligence was telling us they were coming back. We knew they were going to come again, but U.S. and Afghan officials were trying to wish them away.

Good freakin' luck.

At another level, though, the U.S. military was involved in some bad stuff. For weeks, Jack Foster had been bugging me to come over and see 121's "special holding facility." He wanted to show me how they'd converted the former Joint Task Force 5's HQ into this prison, clearly set up for the "enhanced interrogation" program, and offered me a tour.

I knew what he was trying to do, and so I kept putting him off. I had known that there was a "special" system for handling HVT prisoners that the Pentagon leadership didn't want going to the BCP. They also had to be kept from the FBI since the agents who weren't told that an "enhanced interrogation" program had been authorized at the highest level of the U.S. government were legally required to report any prison abuses they witnessed. The interrogation program, called Copper Green, was authorized, but a lot of us felt it wasn't appropriate and just wasn't right. We also all knew that the CIA had a separate secret prison at Bagram. We just stayed away from it.

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