

CHAPTER 1

Maganan, Ethiopia

COLUMNS OF SOLDIERS from the Ethiopian ground forces, a branch of the Ethiopian National Defense Force or ENDF, took turns firing AK47s at silhouette-shaped targets lined up one hundred meters to their front. ODA-595, or Operational Detachment Alpha-595, of the United States Army's 5th Special Forces Group were training them in marksmanship and proper handling of various other weapon systems.

Team Sergeant, Master Sergeant Rob Walker, walked down the line behind soldiers in mismatched woodland and tan-colored camouflage uniforms. He was monitoring them for proper breathing while correcting their form with his hands. Rob was a sniper and had previously served as the team marksman, with his best friend, now Sergeant First Class Kyle Branch, as his spotter. Both men had served together since graduating from the long Special Forces qualification, or Q-course. But, Kyle had been reassigned to a different team a few months earlier. Rob, a weapons sergeant by specialty, was promoted to Master Sergeant around the same time and made team sergeant for ODA-595. Though he still

occasionally conducted sniper missions, Rob's time behind the glass had been reduced significantly since.

Rob's team had been in the country for over two months, instructing Ethiopian troops in counter-terrorism, reconnaissance, demolitions, emergency medicine, and survival techniques. They were also supporting counter-insurgency operations as part of a joint task force with local forces. The Islamic State terrorist organization had been driven from Iraq and Syria years earlier. It had become well known within the American intelligence community that they had ambitions of establishing terrorist training camps in lawless areas of Africa. Two of the countries they were suspected of operating in were Somalia and Sudan, which both bordered Ethiopia.

ODA-595 had been sent in to conduct operations in East Africa alongside the Ethiopian Military and prepare them to repel such threats independently. Their primary mission was to prevent the Islamic State from threatening the Ethiopian border and spreading throughout the Horn of Africa and into other areas of the continent.

A light wind carried red dust along the dirt roadway behind the men as Rob blew the whistle dangling around his neck and held his paddle high in the air.

"Cease fire!" he shouted over the loud sound of rifle rounds popping. "Cease fire. Clear your weapons."

Rob paused a moment for the last man to stop shooting. He observed the soldiers until everyone had dropped their magazines, cleared their weapons, and set them down against the sandbags on the ground beside them.

"Proceed downrange and collect your targets," he continued.

Other members of the Special Forces team marched downrange with their assigned squad to inspect each of their targets. Rob waited and watched as each one gave a thumbs up, signaling that all weapons were zeroed. It had been a long day of training in

the blistering Ethiopian heat. And Rob felt that they were finally making real progress.

“How’d they do, Rob?” the new team commander Captain Jonathan Wells asked as he approached Rob from behind. “They look much better from where I’m standing.”

Captain Wells was a West Point guy and graduated in the top ten percent of his class. Having attended and graduated from Ranger school early on in his career, he never wanted to be in the conventional infantry. As soon as he was able, after his promotion to first lieutenant, he tried out and got selected during the Special Forces Assessment and Selection, or SFAS. Once he graduated from the Q-course, he was promoted to captain and given his team.

“They’re getting better all the time,” Rob replied. “Much better. We just have a few kinks to work out.”

“Well,” Captain Wells said, placing a hand on Rob’s shoulder, “I just got out of a meeting with the battalion commander. We’re a go for tomorrow morning. So, I don’t want to have to worry about getting shot in the back by friendly fire.”

The captain was joking, of course. Ethiopian forces were better than that. In fact, they were one of the best units the team had worked with in a long time. They just had a few bad habits that Rob and his team were dialing down. Compared to some of the units they’d trained in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Ethiopian Military were professionals. With a tad more discipline, they could be even more effective.

“Get ’em ready,” Captain Wells continued. “We have a mission briefing to conduct at 1800.”

“Roger that, boss,” replied Rob.

Rob walked from behind the gaggle of Ethiopians and stood at attention in front of them. He eyeballed random soldiers as they ceased talking amongst themselves.

“Police up your brass,” he told them.

Each soldier kneeled down, plucking their spent bullet casings from the dirt and jamming them by the hand full into large cargo pockets on their uniforms. Rob waited for a couple of minutes until the last piece of brass was removed from the ground. He stood by, arms down by his side with his fists along the seams of his uniform pants. He glanced down the line from right to left until every last Ethiopian soldier was still, eyes straight forward.

“Secure your weapons,” he yelled down the line as he watched each one grab rifles from the sandy ground, holding them by the slings over their shoulders.

“Right face,” he shouted to the formation.

The company of soldiers pivoted right on the balls of their feet, snapping back to attention quickly.

“Forward march,” Rob continued.

Quietly, the formation of soldiers began marching forward toward the large building a few hundred meters from the rifle range, red sand kicking up with each stomp of their boots. Rob was leading the group while the rest of ODA-595 trailed close behind them. As they neared the building, Rob ordered them to stop.

“Company, halt,” he shouted for every soldier to hear. “When I give the command to fall out, file into the briefing room by squad.”

Rob glanced down the line at each of the Ethiopian squad leaders in front of the formation.

“Fall out!”

Squad by squad, all soldiers entered the building and slipped into the briefing room in a single line.

The Ethiopian company commander, Captain Adil Seid, who’d been marching toward the rear of his company, met Rob at the door as the remaining soldiers filed into the building.

“Master Sergeant,” he said as he approached Rob, “could I have a talk with yourself and Captain Wells, please?”

Captain Wells, who overheard the Ethiopian commander as he walked by, stopped in his tracks.

“What is it, Captain Seid?” asked Wells. “We’re about to start the briefing.

“I know,” Seid replied. “But this cannot wait. Could we talk away from here? I promise to be brief.”

Rob pointed toward the side of the structure, and Captain Seid followed them around the corner.

“Okay, Captain,” said Rob, “what was so important that it couldn’t wait?”

Captain Seid hesitated for a moment, his eyebrow raised.

“What is it, Captain?” Wells asked. “Spit it out.”

“Well, it could be nothing,” Seid replied, “but something has been troubling me ever since our last mission in Sudan. I cannot get it out of my mind.”

Rob folded his arms as he glanced back at Seid.

“And, what would that be, Captain?”

“Well,” Seid continued, “before you and your men arrived, our battalion conducted an operation just across the Sudanese border.”

“Okay, and?” Rob asked.

“Well, we saw a group of Americans there. And they didn’t seem like tourists to me. As soon as they saw us, they fled in their vehicles. I think they were hiding.”

Captain Wells glanced at Seid, then to Rob.

“That country doesn’t get many American tourists, obviously,” he said. “And, the American Government isn’t supposed to be in Sudan.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Rob replied.

“But, the team had more pressing business to tend to. They had an upcoming operation to plan.”

“Thanks for informing us, Captain,” said Rob. “Now, if there is nothing else, we have a mission briefing to begin.”

Rob pointed Captain Seid toward the door, and he and

Captain Wells joined the rest of the men in the briefing room. As they stepped down the middle aisle and into the first row, the battalion commander, Colonel Abebe, entered from the back.

“Company, attention!” Captain Seid shouted as the colonel approached the podium and turned on the microphone.

“Take your seats, please,” Colonel Abebe said as he set his clipboard down on the podium.

One of the colonel’s men switched the projector on from behind the row of seats.

“First, I’d like to thank Captain Wells, Master Sergeant Walker, and the rest of the American Special Forces team for helping us to prepare for this upcoming operation. Their expertise and professionalism have been instrumental in assisting our forces in readying ourselves to protect our borders. You and your team have been a great partner in this fight against terrorism on the African continent. And, we commend you on a job well done. As allies and partners in this fight to combat Islamic extremism, we couldn’t do it without you.”

Colonel Abebe glared out at his soldiers, who were listening, eager to hear what their commander had to say.

“I’d like to thank the Americans for their continued support and hard work,” he added. “I’d like to congratulate my battalion as well, for listening and learning from these men. You all have come a long way in recent months. I am truly honored to serve with such men. And, with that, I welcome Captain Wells and Master Sergeant Walker.”

Rob rose from his seat and followed Wells to the front of the room. Captain Wells shook the colonel’s hand as he stepped aside to allow them to get on with the briefing.

“Thank you for that, Colonel Abebe,” said Wells. “And I would also like to thank your command team and soldiers for welcoming us here as allies in the global fight against terrorism. Your commitment to the mission has been nothing less than

professional, and we look forward to working with you for the foreseeable future. So, without further delay, let's get on with it, shall we?"

Captain Wells signaled the soldier in the back of the room. An image of a figure appeared on the projector screen behind them.

"Meet Ahmed Muhammed Aziz. ISIS leader and overall bad guy. American intelligence sources, in cooperation with Ethiopian intelligence, have tracked this man into Sudan, twenty kilometers over the border. He's an ISIS lieutenant suspected of heading a new terror cell to establish training camps in Sudan and across other areas of East Africa. This is a growing threat to the border of Ethiopia. And, if left unchecked, the whole continent. If they are allowed to expand, we could reasonably expect more terror attacks worldwide. We need to prevent this before it becomes a much bigger problem."

Wells glanced back at Rob, who was standing beside him.

"Rob?"

Rob took Wells' place in front of the microphone. "Next slide, please," he said.

As the slide changed, Rob turned around and walked toward the screen. The slide showed the end results of what Aziz and his ISIS comrades had done to those they had captured, many of whom were innocent civilians. Nothing was off-limits. Torturing, maiming, killing were all the norm for such a barbaric group.

"This is what we are fighting," Rob told them. "This is the brutal nature of this type of enemy. They are completely ruthless. And, human life has no value to these people. We must eradicate them from this continent if we are going to prevent them from growing stronger and doing this to others, possibly your own loved ones. They are zealots, as you know. These people are not afraid of death. They welcome it. So, let's send them to their seventy-two virgins in the afterlife."

Rob paused for a second, hearing the audible gasps of some of the soldiers in the crowded room. "Next slide, please."

Captain Wells approached the screen as an aerial photo of a village appeared. "This is our mission," he said, pointing at the photo. "This is a village near Madaqq, Sudan. Our intel sources have confirmed that Aziz and his ISIS cell are in the area surrounding this village. Your mission is to cover my team as we enter the structure, and guard the street, not letting anyone in or out."

"Make no mistake," Rob interjected, "this man is brutal. If you are captured, you will likely be tortured and killed. Do what you have been trained to do, and you should be fine."

Rob approached the screen and placed a finger on the image.

"We will surround this area," he added, circling his hand around the village perimeter. "There will be no capture. These men are to be killed on sight."

"Right," said Captain Wells. "Captain Seid, your men are to surround the perimeter of the village while my team and I get in and do what we have to do. Once the mission is completed, we will meet up at the designated rendezvous point."

"Roger," said Seid.

"Any questions?"

The room became so quiet you could've heard a pin drop.

"No?" Rob interrupted. "All right, then. Get some food and rest. Make sure you clean the range grime off your rifles. We move out at 0400."