TOUGH AS THEY COME

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TOUGH AS THEY COME

TRAVIS MILLS
WITH MARCUS BROTHERTON



CONVERGENT BOOKS
NEW YORK

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First Edition

To all my fallen brothers and sisters of the 82nd Airborne Division.

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Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.

Joshua 1:9

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

These days I do a lot of public speaking, and there are two things I say to any audience right up front. I wanted to say those things to you as well.

The first is that I don't hold the value of my service in the military above anyone else's. I don't think I served better or harder or greater than any other soldier. I'm just thankful I was able to serve my country. If you were in the service or are serving now, no matter what your job is, I want to tell you I'm hugely thankful, personally. If you aren't a veteran, but you support our military service members, then thank you for that support as well. Sincerely, it means a lot to me.

Second, even though I've been wounded badly, I don't think the challenges in my life are any greater than anyone else's. Sometimes after people hear my story they say, "Man, I don't know if I could ever press forward like that, and overcome challenges like you have." But I say everybody faces challenges in life, big and small. My problems are no greater than yours. Simply put, yours are yours, mine are mine, and we're all in this together.

I've been fortunate to work through my situation and lead a

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positive and fulfilling life again. I hope this book will motivate you if you need to get through a challenging situation. The key is that you've got to believe it's going to get better. Keep going. Keep persevering. You're going to get through tough times. Never give up. Never quit.

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1

A 15-MINUTE HELICOPTER RIDE FROM KANDAHAR

Early spring 2012

ONLY ONE BOY PLAYED WITH HIS KITE.

The rest of the kids in the village of Maiwand took the kites we'd given them and ripped them apart. They threw the shredded kites on the ground and spat on them. Then they went over to the boy who played with his kite and hit him and spit on him. The boy's lip swelled up and his nose turned bloody. They destroyed his kite too. When there were no more kites to destroy, the children glared in our direction, cursed, and shouted anti-American slogans. A few flung dirt clods. Those Afghan kids were the best dirt clod flingers I'd ever seen.

We shrugged off our chilly reception and adjusted our weapons. I checked to see that the security detail was all right near the perimeter of the village and reminded myself that this was only our first patrol in the area. You can't blame a kid for hating American soldiers when terrorists have spread lies about us throughout their region.

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I knew the Taliban were bastards. They ruled by fear. They hated us, and they also hated schools, elections, women's rights, and freedom. They slaughtered civilians, scorched acres of fertile farmland, stopped United Nations food shipments from reaching starving people, and destroyed tens of thousands of homes.

The Taliban didn't even fight fairly. They were too chicken for that. They blended in among civilians and shot at us while they used their own schoolchildren for cover. They placed improvised explosive devices (IEDs) into the ground where anybody passing by could step on them—enemy, farmer, or child.

No, I thought, these kids in Maiwand weren't Taliban. They had no news, no TV, no iPods, no means of ever hearing anything different about us. No, they weren't to blame. I always kept in mind who the real enemy was.

Clouds hung low, and wind whipped cold at us from across the desert. After our failed attempt at kite diplomacy, we sat down with village elders and explained our purpose for being in the area. They gave us a warmer welcome. About thirty men gathered in a circle. The elders, shrouded in dark beards and flowing robes, nodded at us from underneath their turbans. No women were present, although once in a while a female figure would pass by in the distance. The figure would be covered in black from head to toe. No face. Only eyes.

We gathered out in the open in the middle of their town square, a primitive dirt crossroads in the middle of a cluster of mud huts. The lower-ranking soldiers set up a security detail and didn't join our circle. They kept their helmets on, their weapons ever ready. But the higher-ranking soldiers, the officers and most of the noncommissioned officers (NCOs), joined the circle. We took off our helmets, wanting the elders to begin to feel comfortable in our presence, and we sat on the dirt or took a knee while they squatted on their haunches, a style of sitting they're com-

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fortable with. We were served scalding hot chai tea as a gesture of their hospitality. At that temperature, the tea would be safe to drink, yet we eyed the cups closely anyway, knowing what havoc a microscopic desert bug can wreak inside a gut. The elders listened intently when we spoke through an interpreter, and when we shut up they spoke passionately about their desire for freedom and security in their homeland.

What we communicated to the elders was that we were in their region to help the Afghan National Army (ANA) gain a presence in the area. Maiwand is only about a fifteen-minute Chinook helicopter ride away from Kandahar, the second-largest city in Afghanistan, and a city that once had been the Taliban's headquarters.

Ultimately, we wanted to push the Taliban out of the region and keep them from influencing the population. I knew the village elders were no strangers to American soldiers. As soon as our helicopters had touched down earlier the night before, the unit ahead of us had rotated out. We were just another spoke in the military wheel, and the elders nodded along with us and smiled and agreed that the Taliban were the bad guys. The elders didn't want them there either. They'd do whatever they could to help us, they said.

I hoped the elders weren't just telling us what we wanted to hear. This was my third deployment to Afghanistan, and I knew by now to be wary of even the most sincere-sounding agreements. A quiet circle of village elders might indeed be our friends, but they also could have a Taliban member secretly embedded in their circle. Or they might simply be playing it safe, declaring their allegiance to whatever military force was present at the time. I drained the last of my tea and stayed alert, always on my guard, always ready for an attack.

I was even wary of the ANA, the Afghan soldiers, who'd come

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along with us on this mission. They stood near the circle, rifles in arms. They'd signed up to fight for their country and were our allies, our counterparts. During other deployments, Afghan soldiers had hiked along with us on almost every patrol we went on, and we'd helped train and equip them. By decree, we were on the same side.

Still, I feared getting shot in my sleep. Not by the ANA themselves. But, again, by whoever might be embedded within their ranks. Whenever we stayed outside our compound, the ANA slept only about a hundred yards away from us. My fear was that some dude would pop up suddenly in the dark of night and start killing U.S. soldiers. I'd long since learned that danger lurked around every corner in Afghanistan. I never knew for certain if we were safe.

The meeting with the elders seemed to go smoothly, so we headed back to the strongpoint to report to our higher-ups what we knew so far. It had been a good day. Nobody got hurt. Everybody came back alive. When we were about twenty yards away from the barbed-wire gate of our base, I jogged ahead of my guys, did an about-face with a big smile, held up my hands to high-five them all through the gate, and started singing one of my favorite marching cadences as loudly as I could:

When I was younger I always wanted to be,
In the 82nd Airborne, knees to the breeze.
Now that I'm here, I'm going to do it right,
I'm gonna slip on down to a firefight.
All the way Airborne, Airborne all the way.
Drive it on, drive it on.

The guys all grinned, hiked at a faster rate, and high-fived me back as they ripped through the gates into the strongpoint. They

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knew I was just performing my routine. By nature, I'm not an angry person. Not usually grumpy, moody, or upset. I love life, and the biggest reason I was on this deployment was because of a sense of solidarity with my guys.

My rank was staff sergeant. I was an NCO, part of the backbone of the army. Specifically, I was a weapons squad leader in 1st Platoon, Bravo Troop, 4/73rd Cavalry Squadron, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division. It's a long title, I know. Basically I was a paratrooper and a combat infantry soldier. I was a frontline soldier in a war without front lines.

As an NCO, I worked for my men. My job was to take my men to Afghanistan, do the job, and bring them all home safely. My attitude was that my guys always came first. Always. They ate first, and if there was no food left, then I didn't eat. When we were tired, they slept first. When we were out in the hot sun, they drank water first. They carried lighter loads than me. That was the way I wanted it.

I'd known most of the men in my unit for about a year, but already we felt like brothers. Work in the army can be like that. The army is a moving machine—guys get plugged in and taken out all the time. But the brotherhood you feel in a combat unit such as mine is intense; it has no direct comparison in the civilian world. The closest I'd ever experienced to it before was the feeling I got on a football team in high school. But even that wasn't the same. The time you spend together in a combat troop is concentrated. It bonds men together because of the constant need to lay your life down for the sake of others. Because of the ever-present threat of bloodshed and death.

I wasn't even supposed to go on this third deployment. I was supposed to be stationed somewhere else. But I had my orders changed. If my guys were going, then there was no way they were going to go to Afghanistan without me. I'd promised my wife,

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Kelsey, that this deployment would be my last. My plan was to knock out this time in Afghanistan, come home, and become a recruiter at Fort Bragg. Kelsey and I already owned a house near there. In time, I'd finish up my twenty years in the military, retire from the army, then become a schoolteacher and football coach all by the ripe old age of forty.

Those were my big goals. The plan seemed smooth. But why did I have a different feeling in my gut about this deployment? One I'd never had before?

Six weeks passed in Afghanistan. We went on patrols every day and got into a series of firefights. Fortunately, none of our men were wounded in combat during those first six weeks. We gritted our teeth and carried on. This was our job. This was what we signed up to do. A constant uneasiness hung in the air.

The morning of April 10, 2012, dawned bright. It was four days before my twenty-fifth birthday, and the sun hung low and hot in the eastern sky. Glancing about me, I saw the little villages that sat in the sand all around our strongpoint. Mountains squatted far in the distance. All looked calm. But there was a sly, almost unnoticeable breeze. It dried a man's sweat and kicked up a handful of dust on his skin. It felt like the type of day where anything could happen. Or hopefully nothing.

I brushed my teeth in bottled water, rinsed my face, and woke up my team leaders by heartily singing the 82nd Airborne song.

Put on your boots, boots, boots and parachutes, chutes, chutes,
We're going up, up, up and coming down, down, down,
We're All American and proud to be,
for we're the soldiers of liberty,

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Some fly their gliders to the enemy,
others are sky paratroopers.
We're All American and fight we will,
till all the guns of the foe are still.
Airborne from skies of blue, we're coming through, let's go.

Our strongpoint was triangular-shaped, 150 yards by 150 yards by 150 yards. Inside the triangle was a dining tent, mortar pits, a parking lot for vehicles, an operating office, ten tents for living quarters, and walled-off areas where you could shower by using bottled water. There was no running water. No outside power. We burned our own trash and feces. At the edge of each of the three vertices of the compound stood a huge guard tower. At this particular time, forty-six men lived in this stronghold, along with two women soldiers who had their own tent. Our deployment was a short one, set to last seven to nine months at most, and we'd probably be based out of the strongpoint for the entire deployment, although plans could always change.

We were taking the day off; no patrols were scheduled, so I let my other men doze a bit longer while my team leaders and I headed over to the chow tent for breakfast. A Unitized Group Ration (UGR) was being served. I was thankful. While a UGR wasn't as good as eating at IHOP, I knew there were days on deployment when a soldier doesn't eat at all. There were no complaints from me, particularly with my sausages and eggs smothered in hot sauce, salt, and pepper.

Days off when you're on deployment are nothing to write home about. Everybody on deployment has a computer with a hard drive stocked full of movies and TV shows. My favorite movies were *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Gladiator*, *300*, *Troy*, and *The Patriot*. I'd seen them all more times than I could count. I loved

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the crime drama *Sons of Anarchy*, about an outlaw motorcycle club, and I think I'd seen every episode of the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* at least twice. If a guy had something—anything—then we watched it. I don't know what it was about *That '70s Show*, but it always made me laugh. My lieutenant was even sent a DVD of the show *Glee* once, and everybody mocked him for it, but we all watched it anyway. We were also lucky in our strongpoint to have three telephones and five computers with Internet access, so we were able to check email regularly and Skype home, which is what I did right after breakfast.

Because of the time difference, my morning was Kelsey's nighttime, and her familiar face popped up on the computer screen looking like she was just about ready for bed. My wife is beautiful. She has blondish-brown hair that falls a little past her shoulders, and I looked straight into her eyes. We usually didn't have long conversations over Skype like this. But we'd check in each day with each other just to say, "I love you, all's well." She held up our baby, Chloe, for me to see, and I kissed the tips of two fingers and touched them to the screen to say good night. Chloe cooed, grinned, and waved.

After that, I hit the gym. It's nothing to write home about either. We called it a prison gym. It's in the middle of the strongpoint and has bars, bells, and benches. Nothing fancy. At six foot three and 250 pounds, I liked to stay in shape. I never did cardio while on deployment, because when you're out all day on patrol, packing 150 pounds around in the hot sun, that's all the cardio you need. But every day I went through a basic weight routine of rolls, shrugs, backs, and presses. The sun was already hot, and I wished I was back at home heading down to the local air-conditioned Planet Fitness.

When you're hanging out with guys lifting weights, you tend

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to shoot the bull in between reps. A favorite topic at the prison gym was what you'd eat for your first meal when you got home again. My favorite meal is steak, preferably wood-fired, with cheesecake for dessert. So we lifted, then talked about steak, then lifted some more. Then we talked about homemade mac and cheese. Then we discussed fried chicken and buttery corn on the cob in great detail. We concluded with a conversation about a frosty glass of beer along with a salty bag of potato chips. Somewhere in there we talked about a fresh slice of warm apple pie.

The rest of the day passed slowly. We threw around a football for a while, ate more military rations for lunch, and watched some crap on TV. We were always ready to go, even while on a day off. Our weapons were always cleaned and loaded. Our backpacks were always full. Our ammo was stocked and set. If an order came in, we could fully assemble as a platoon and head out the gate in under ten minutes.

Late in the afternoon, about 4:30 p.m., we received a tip from a local civilian informant. There were IEDs in the area, the informant suspected, and he asked us to come check it out. That meant our day off was officially over. The tip wasn't anything unusual, but we weren't nonchalant about it either. Each time we went out the gate, we were on high alert.

Specifically, I was responsible for two weapons teams of four men each. Whenever my teams got into a firefight, the responsibility ultimately fell to me. I told my men where to go and what to do. I told them to shoot or not to shoot. I made sure they stayed safe and came back alive.

Each of my teams carried what's called a 240 Bravo—the biggest dismount-and-carry machine gun the military has. It's a long, sinister gun that weighs about twenty-seven pounds. It can shoot at a rapid rate and hit a target a long distance away. You can

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mount a 240 Bravo on a vehicle if needed, or carry it around with you while patrolling. In addition to the guns, between both of my teams, we carried two thousand rounds of ammunition.

My senior team was composed of four soldiers: Specialist Cobia Farr, the assistant gunner; Private First Class Armando Plascencia, a designated squad marksman who carried a long-range rifle like a sniper would; Private First Class Eric Hunter, the gunner; and Private First Class Jon Harmon, the ammo bearer, who carried the rounds and also took rear security. This team could operate without me and had just come off a patrol, so that day I told them to stay back on base.

My junior team was composed of myself and three others: Private First Class Ryan Theriot (we called him "The Riot"), the assistant gunner; Private First Class Brandon Fessey, the ammo bearer; and Private First Class James Neff, our gunner. They were the younger guys, so I stuck with them.

When the call came, I suited up along with my junior team and buckled my Kevlar plate carrier vest around me. It clicked into place and I instantly felt tough and protected, like a gladiator with his sword unsheathed and his shield up. Along with the bulletproof plates, my vest also carried a small first-aid kit, a grenade pouch with ten of those inside, twelve ammo magazines, a camera, a bottle, a sunglass holder, pens and maps, and a radio hookup. I slapped on my kneepads, threw on eye protection, and rolled my gloves at the wrists and flexed my hands into fists. It's an internal signal that lets me know I'm ready for battle. It reminds me that I'm not looking for a fight, but if someone wants to fight me, then he's going down, not me.

I clipped my helmet into place and slung my weapon around me. In my backpack were more rounds of ammo, water, food, an extra T-shirt, baby powder to prevent chafing, and a little photo album I always carry of my family. Altogether, depending on

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what it had in it for any particular mission, my backpack added another 80 to 110 pounds onto my frame.

As I walked out of the gate past the guard tower, I pulled back the charging handle of my weapon and let it go. Every man did the same. That way, you're "cocked, locked, and ready to rock," and when you hear the round lock into place, you claim the dominant mind-set that nobody had better mess with you today.

Absolutely nobody.

We hiked only about four hundred yards to the village. In addition to my weapons team, there were other squads along on the patrol, a total of twenty-eight soldiers. My lieutenant, Zachary Lewis, went to the left with the first and second squads, heading to meet with the village elders, while the rest of our men went with me around the village on the outside to offer support in case of an attack. Along with my gun team, I had my platoon sergeant and a medic, Sergeant Daniel Bateson, with my group. All looked calm. It seemed like just another day in Afghanistan. Another normal patrol.

We approached an abandoned ANA security post (two portable buildings), and stopped near the buildings to establish a security perimeter. I called for Fessey to bring the minesweeper. It's a wand that goes up and around his arm, and it looks like a metal detector a guy would use at the beach. If the minesweeper makes a noise, that means something's in the soil. If we hear a beep, then we mark the spot, go around it, and have the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) guys dig out and dispose of whatever's under there. Whenever we found an IED, we'd never mess with it ourselves. Mines can be unpredictable, and you want the experts to handle them. Some IEDs aren't even made of metal, just plastic and glass, which can sometimes fool a minesweeper. But even

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then, the minesweeper is designed to have ground-penetrating capability. It can usually detect if something's in the ground and it's not soil.

"Check this area" was the only order I gave.

Fessey walked up a path used by villagers and scanned all around the area. He went up and back, and all was clear. No beeps. There was no reason to question anything. Fessey finished his minesweeping duties and went to set up on the far flank.

I called Riot up to me and asked him where he thought we should put up the gun. I knew where it should go, but I wanted to let him decide, making sure he knew his stuff. He motioned to exactly where I thought we should put it, a good spot, and I said, "All right. Go get Neff and bring him up here." That was it. Riot left to go get Neff, and as he did, I set my backpack down. The backpack touching the dirt was all it took.

Such a simple act of war.

My world erupted.

I saw a flash of flame and heard a huge *ka-boom*. Hot jagged pieces of explosives ripped through me. I cartwheeled backward end over end, hit the ground, and slammed my face hard against the compacted earth. Instantly I felt my left eye starting to swell shut. I smelled burning flesh—my own. I tasted dirt, and I was wet with sweat and moisture like I'd just walked out of a hot shower.

Dirt fell everywhere through the air. It rained down and clung to my eyes, nose, and mouth. I don't remember rolling over, but I must have, because I glanced to the side and saw that my right arm was completely gone. I caught a glimpse of my left arm, covered in blood and tattered. The arm trembled as if it had a will of its own. I looked down and saw that my right leg was also gone. The stump looked like a piece of raw meat. The bottom of

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my left leg was still attached but held on by only a few strands of skin. I saw all this in a flash, an instant.

I felt confusion but no panic. My first thought was of my guys. I flopped my remaining arm toward the microphone clipped to my plate carrier and somehow managed to push the button. "I hit a bomb," I said. "I need help."

Bateson, my medic, rushed up to me along with Staff Sergeant Keith Hambright, our platoon sergeant. Only about thirty seconds had passed since the blast. Immediately they applied tourniquets to hold in whatever blood was still inside me.

"I'm not going to make it," I said. "Leave me and go save my guys."

"Shut up, Sergeant Mills," Bateson said. "Let me do my job."

I ignored Bateson and yelled my men's names like a roll call: "Fessey! Riot! Neff!" to see if they were okay. Two were hit, Fessey and Riot, and other medics were already caring for them. They were bleeding, but nothing was missing. They yelled back that they were going to be okay.

I calmed down.

More soldiers ran toward me. Sergeant Alex Voyce, another medic, wondered aloud where to best get IV access. There were no pulses to check except for my carotid artery. He quickly ripped open my vest, shaved a spot on my chest, and put an IV straight into my sternum. It hurt going in, and I must have howled, because he yelled at me that I was going to be fine. I yelled back, "Doc, shut up. I know." He and I both calmed down.

Someone stuck a Fentanyl pop in my mouth. It's a potent painkiller that releases as the pop dissolves. I downed the first one, spit out the stick, and asked for another.

"You won't need it," someone said.

I was still thinking that I was going to die. I didn't want to

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show fear. I didn't want to freak out. You never want to show fear around your men. "Let my family know I dealt with it without crying," I said.

"Tell them yourself," someone grunted. He was being encouraging, letting me know I wasn't dead yet.

I tried to see around me. I raised my head, wanting to get a visual of Fessey and Riot.

Someone shoved my head back down. "Lie still," commanded a voice.

My one eye was completely swollen shut. The other eye was blurry from dirt. I tried to raise my head again. Again I was pushed flat. My eyes were watering now, the dirt turning to mud. Time passed and I didn't know what was happening. I mumbled something, but there was no reply. Only the steady *whup whup whup* of a Blackhawk helicopter touching down nearby. Six men surrounded me, hefted me up, and carried me over. All told, it might have been ten minutes since the blast until the helicopter arrived.

Fessey and Riot were already inside the helicopter. Everything was foggy and noisy, and I couldn't make out my surroundings clearly. My two guys were on seats and I saw blood and bandages jumbled in their direction. Fessey had shrapnel in his face. Riot had shrapnel in his face, legs, and hand. Their images faded away. I focused on the *whup whup whup* of the rotors.

We were in the air, and the flight medics were taking care of me. Riot yelled in pain. I tried to look around. Someone needed to attend to Riot. Where were the medics? One of the medics was talking to the pilots up front. Riot was yelling again. I looked in Fessey's direction and told him to calm down. Fessey nodded. Riot stopped yelling, and I winked at him to let him know he was going to be okay. It was all I could think to do.

The flight medic was back in view. I could barely see him

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through the goop in my eyes. He wore a green flight suit and a big Darth Vader helmet. I tried to speak. He gave me a quizzical look. I yelled as loudly as I could, "Take off your helmet!"

He took his helmet off.

"Give my guys water and tell them they're going to be okay!" I barked.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of them for you," he said. He was busy with some task on me that I couldn't see.

A moment went by, and I added, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" the medic asked.

"For making you take your helmet off."

He gave me a wry grin.

I realized he'd been doing his job all along. Doing it well. Both of the medics had. I just couldn't see all that was happening around me. My mind went in and out. I was coherent but fuzzy in spots.

In fifteen minutes, the helicopter landed in Kandahar.

Hospital staff rushed me straight to the operating table. "We're going to put you under now," came a voice from above me.

"I'm fine," I said. "Leave me alone."

The mask came over my face and I tried to push it away. I remember asking one question: "Am I ever going to see my baby girl again?"

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