

BULLET PROOF FAITH



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The incident in Mogadishu, Somalia, made famous by the book and movie, *Black Hawk Down*, changed my life.

It all began after high school when I visited an army recruiter. I asked, "What do you consider the toughest job in the army?"

"Being an airborne ranger," was his quick reply.

"That's what I want to be."

GOALS

I had two goals when I joined the army. One was to see how good my training was and the other was to test my faith in God. I knew the best way to accomplish these goals was to go to war.

In the 1989 invasion of Panama, *Operation Just Cause*, and later in Kuwait, *Operation Desert Storm*, I was shot at and placed in many dangerous situations. But I never thought I was in danger of losing my life.

SOMALIA

All this changed in 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia. The United Nations had been handing out food to the starving people in this East African country. There were several warlords in Somalia, and most of them had no problems with the U.N. One, Mohamed Farrah Aidid, saw the U.N. as a threat to his power. He began to ambush and kill U.N. workers. In one raid he killed and mutilated 24 Pakistanis.

The goal of my unit, Task Force Ranger, was to capture Aidid and bring his key men to justice for the death of those Pakistani workers.

Prior to our final mission on October 3rd and 4th, Task Force Ranger had conducted six successful operations. Everything had gone exactly as planned. But on that seventh mission, generally referred to as *Black Hawk Down*, things changed.

THE CONVOY

I was a 24 year old squad leader and placed my nine men in two Humvees. We led a ten vehicle ground convoy into the city. The job of the convoy was to retrieve the Rangers and Special Operations Forces who had been dropped by helicopter onto the roof and in the surrounding alleys of the target building. We were to return them and their prisoners to our base.

The operation went exactly as planned with one exception; a Ranger, Todd Blackburn, in a Black Hawk helicopter, missed the slide rope and fell 70 feet to the ground. He hit head first and our medics felt he would not survive unless he received immediate special medical care. As soon as I arrived at the target building, my commander called and told me to take Todd back to our base at the airport.

We loaded him into a Humvee and with my two vehicles around him we began to make our way back to the airfield. Mogadishu is about seven by two

miles in size and one and a half million people had gathered there from all over Somalia to be fed.

PILLA'S DEAD

When we turned the corner onto Hawlwadig Road heading for the airfield, it seemed that all 1.5 million people were on every rooftop, doorway and window shooting at us. I placed a Ranger on each side of my vehicle to defend us. Sergeant Dominick Pilla, the best machine gunner I've ever seen, was sitting behind me shooting at targets on the right side of my Humvee.

As we drove through the hail of enemy bullets and grenades, a Somali gunman pointed his AK-47 at Dominick. Both fired and both were killed at the same moment. Pilla was shot in his forehead and died immediately slumping into Ranger Tim Moynihan's lap.

Tim began to panic and lose control. He screamed, "Sergeant Struecker, Dominick Pilla has been shot! He's been hit! He's killed!" When I looked back I saw the entire back of my vehicle painted red with Pilla's blood.

For a minute I felt panic along with everyone in my Humvee. The only thing I could think to say to Moynihan, "Tim, take Dominick's place and take out all those targets on the right side. You need to keep us alive."

We made it back to the airfield and I thought to myself, *Thank God I'm alive.*

GO BACK

As doctors were taking Todd Blackburn off and removing Pilla's body, my platoon leader said, "There's been a Black Hawk helicopter shot down. Get your men and go back into the city."

I thought to myself, *There is no way I can go back out there.* I sent my men for more ammunition and fuel and began to clean Dominick Pilla's blood off my vehicle. I thought, *God, I'm going to die tonight.* I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt there was no way to survive this situation.

GOD I NEED YOU

I didn't know what to do or say, so I did what any Christian would do in this situation. I prayed. I didn't negotiate with God nor did I hear a booming voice from heaven. I simply said, *"God I need your help, I'm in over my head!"* Then I pictured in my mind Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.* I could see Him bowing His knee before God and praying before He went to the cross. I could hear Him say, as if He was right next to me, *"God, if there is any way possible, let this cup pass from me."* I prayed those same words. Then I remembered what Jesus said next. *"Not my will, but Yours be done."* *Matthew 24:26-29

At that moment, I realized something I had known since I became a Christian at age 13. As a Christian, no matter what happens to me in this life, if I live or die, I am firmly in God's hands.

My wife, Dawn, had just written to tell me she was pregnant. I thought I'd never see her again or hold my child. If by some miracle of God I survived this situation, I would go home to my family. As a Christian I also knew if I died I'd go

home to heaven and be with my Savior. So *no matter what happens to me tonight, I'm going home. I'm going to be safe*, I thought.

NO FEAR

From that moment on, I felt no fear. It didn't matter if I lived or died. I still believed none of us would survive. I just prayed, "*God, don't let another one of my soldiers die.*"

As we loaded up our vehicle to go back into the city, one of my men, Brad Thomas, came to me. He said, "Sergeant, I can't go out there. I've a wife and family back home. I can't go, I know I'll die."

I said, "Brad I know you're scared. I'm scared. We're all afraid. In fact if you're not afraid there's something psychologically wrong. But, Brad, don't think of yourself as a coward because you're scared. The difference between a hero and a coward is not fear, but what you do with the fear. I won't make you go, but I need you."

I left him alone and got into my vehicle. In the rear view mirror, I watched Brad pick up his weapon. He got back into his vehicle fully expecting to die. He was willing to give his life for the mission. I felt my heart swell with pride as I drove out the gate.

We drove out of our base a second time. The Somalis were setting up road blocks and burning tires at every intersection. They fired their weapons and grenade launchers not ten feet away. Miraculously, none of my men were killed.

Soon we met a group of Rangers whose vehicles were badly shot up. Several had been killed, others wounded. Their vehicles were non-operational, so we loaded them on ours and took them back to the base.

I thought, *We're safe, we've gotten everybody out. We're okay!*

GO BACK AGAIN

Then my commander told us one half of our men were still in the city, and he sent us back a third time.

More help was needed, and the U.N. forces stationed close by were asked to assist with their tanks and armored cars.

A huge convoy was assembled, including two Pakistani tanks and Malaysian armored cars, to rescue our men. I thought, *Surely the Somalis will not fight armored vehicles*. But as soon as the tanks turned down the main street every Somali weapon began to fire.

For the next 12 hours the convoy fought its way into the city. It was 8:00 A.M. the next morning before we were able to recover our men. My Humvee was ordered to follow the last tank out. I said to myself, *The tank is leaving before us?* I told my machine gunner, Brad Paulson, "We'll be the last vehicle out, so face your gun backward because everyone behind us is a bad guy."

We had driven about a mile when Brad said, "Sergeant, there are men running down the road after us." I looked and saw 15 American soldiers looking scared to death, running down the road shooting at targets to the left and right. We had left 15 men in the city! My platoon leader, in his vehicle ahead of me, and I decided to let the convoy go. We backed up, loaded those men, and drove

them to security.

HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN?

I'll never forget what I saw at the stadium. It wasn't the bullets or the blood that made such an impression on me. It was the men I had served with for so long. I had let them know I was a Christian long before we went to Somalia and I had tried to share my faith with them. They wanted nothing to do with it.

On October 4th those battle hardened Rangers came to me with tears in their eyes and a lot of questions. "How could this happen to us? We're supposed to be the best in the world. Why would God allow it to happen? What happened to my friend who just died? What's going to happen to me if we go back into that city and I die?"

THE ANSWER

I didn't have all the answers for most of these questions, but there was one question to which I did know the answer. *What will happen if you die tomorrow?* For the next several days I told as many people who would listen what happens when you die.

"The answer," I said, "is in the Bible. 'It is appointed for men once to die and after that is the judgment.'* I don't know when you will die, but everyone will die, and a moment later stand before the judgment seat of God. The difference between a Christian and someone who isn't a Christian is this: when Christians stand before God they won't take the punishment for their sins. They are not condemned for what they've done wrong."** *Hebrews 9:27 **John 3:17-18

Jesus Christ knew when he prayed that night in the Garden of Gethsemane that there was no other way for men to be right with God unless He died in their place. He made the decision to carry out His mission to make a way for men to come to God. When He died on the cross, He paid the penalty for everything we've ever done wrong: past, present and future.

Two kinds of people will stand before the judgment of God. The first are those who have never put their trust in Jesus as their personal Savior. These people will suffer the full consequences for their sins, eternal separation from God. The second are those who have said, "I have placed my trust and faith in Jesus Christ alone. I trust when He died on that cross, He paid the penalty for my sins." They will spend eternity with God the Father in heaven.

Can you say if you died right now you would know for certain that you have eternal life? When you stand before God, will you stand forgiven because of what Jesus did for you on the cross, or will you stand condemned for your own sins?

If you can't say with full assurance, "I know for sure if I die this very moment I will spend eternity with God in heaven," it is suicide to go through the rest of your life without asking Jesus to be your Savior.

I want to give you an opportunity to make a commitment to God and settle forever your relationship with Him. Jesus said if you ask, He will come into your life, forgive your sins and give you eternal life.

This is a simple prayer you can pray. *"Lord Jesus thank you for dying on that cross to pay the penalty for my sins. You promised to come into my life,*

forgive my sins and give me eternal life. I know you don't lie, so I thank you for coming into my life as you promised. From this day forward I'm going to believe Your Word that You now live in me. Amen."

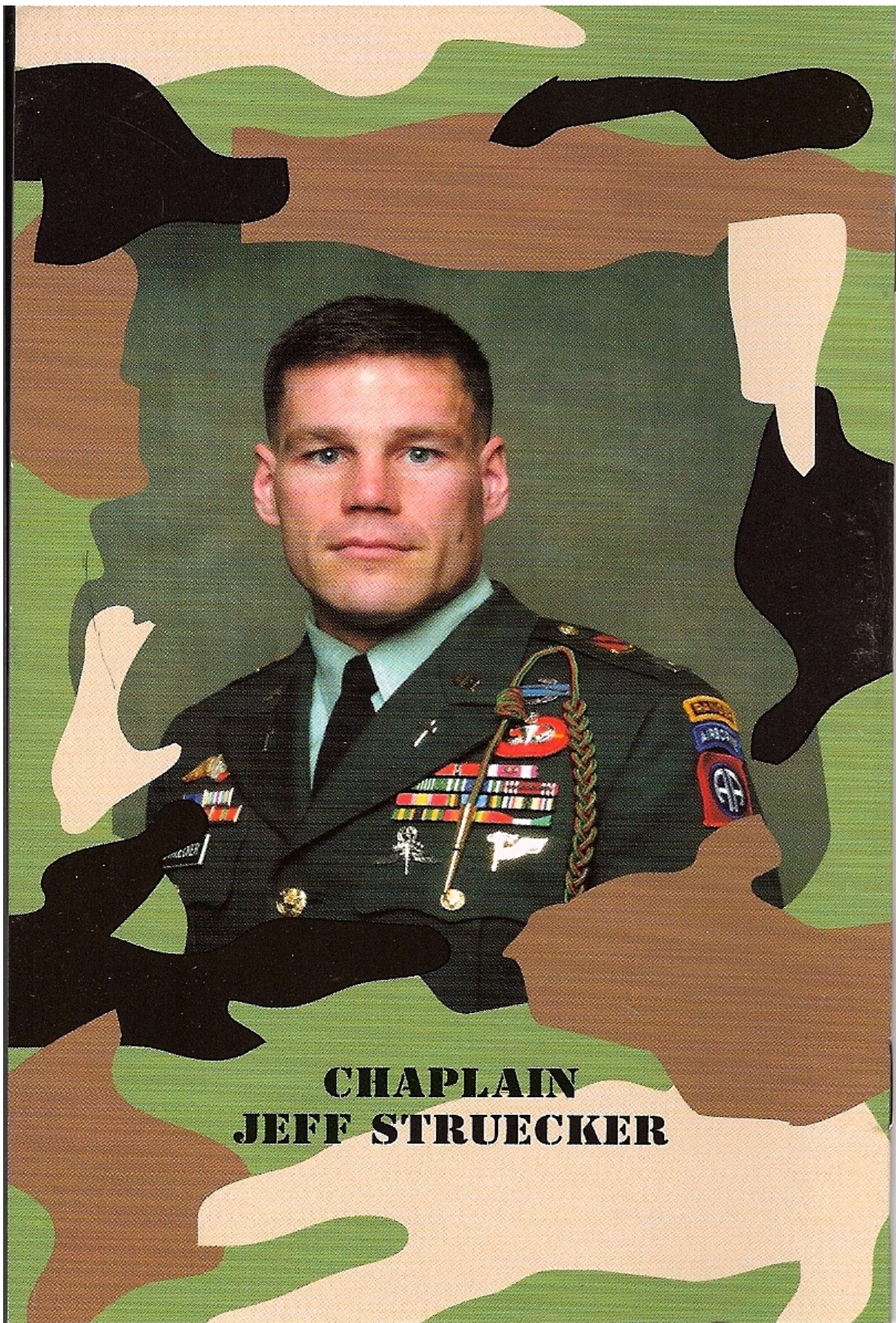
WRITE ME

If you prayed that prayer please write me:

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so I can send you some valuable materials to help you grow in your relationship with God.

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