

# SUA SPONTE

The Forging of a Modern  
American Ranger



DICK COUCH



BERKLEY CALIBER, NEW YORK

# SUA SPONTE

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*This book is dedicated to all special operations training cadres—the veterans who take time from their operational units to cycle back through the training commands and pass along their experience, their wisdom, their culture, and their values to the next generation of special operators. Through their dedication and professionalism, each generation of these special warriors prepares for the mission a little better, gets to the fight a little quicker, and executes on target just a little more skillfully.*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A writer, even a former special operator turned writer, does not easily enter the closed and private world of a Special Operations Forces (SOF) component's selection and assessment. Modern special operators have a very formatted and tradition-bound approach to choosing who will and will not become one of their own. So it is with those who will and will not soldier with the 75th Ranger Regiment. For allowing me free and unprecedented access to their selection and training venues, I'd like to thank the Regimental Commanding Officers and Regimental Command Sergeant Majors who allowed this to take place during their tenure of command: Colonel Richard Clarke and Command Sergeant Major Chris Hardy; Colonel Eric Krilla and Command Sergeant Major Richard Merritt. And my thanks to the Regimental Deputy, Colonel Bill Ostlund, who served both of those commanders and was most helpful to me. I'd be remiss if I neglected to mention their boss, Lieutenant General Frank Mulholland, Commander, U.S. Army Special Operations Command. For my time with the Ranger Training Brigade, I'd like to thank Command Sergeant Major Dennis Smith. For my time with the 1st Ranger Battalion, I'm indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Mike Foster and Command Sergeant Major Nicholas Bielich, who made me most welcome at 1/75. And for all the many cadre noncommissioned officers in charge (NCOICs), cadre sergeants, company commanders, company first sergeants, platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, squad leaders, fire-team leaders, and individual Rangers; thank you all for so graciously making time for me as you trained the warriors and as you yourselves prepared for war. You held me to standard and taught me of the high standard that is a way of life for those who serve in the 75th Ranger Regiment.

Rangers Lead the Way!

## **SUA SPONTE.**

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Latin for “of their own accord.”

*Describes an action taken on one’s own initiative and without formal permission from or the approval of higher authority.  
Also the motto of the 75th Ranger Regiment.*



# FOREWORD

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How does an organization recruit, train, educate, develop, and motivate professional Soldiers the caliber of Sergeant First Class Leroy Petry? Sergeant Petry was recently awarded the Medal of Honor. He was also a member of the 75th Ranger Regiment, one of the most prestigious special operations units in the U.S. military. Sergeant Petry remains on active duty as a Regimental Ranger, even though he lost his right hand in the action for which he was awarded the medal. Sergeant Petry's Regiment has been in continuous combat since November 2001, with approximately one-third of the Regiment deployed overseas at any given period. Yet despite this arduous deployment cycle and the rigorous physical and mental standards for selection, this Regiment does not lack for volunteers. Nor does it lack for experience. It has one of the highest reenlistment rates in the U.S. Army.

*Sua Sponte* is a must-read—for the military historian, for the young man considering volunteering for the Regiment, or for anyone wanting to understand what it is to soldier with the 75th Rangers. For those “scrolled Rangers,” past and present, it will bring back memories of what forged their foundation as one of America's premier warrior-leaders. Dick Couch, a renowned former Navy SEAL with an enviable combat record, was granted unprecedented access to the regimental selection process and training venues. As an embed with the 1st Ranger Battalion during its prerotation work-up, he was able to document how Rangers prepare for modern combat deployment. His chronicle of the rigorous training that develops a young Soldier into a young, apprentice Ranger is detailed, accurate, and captivating without compromising issues the Regiment wishes not to divulge for security reasons. Dick expands his account to address the selection process for new and returning officers and noncommissioned officers who wish to serve as leaders in the 75th Ranger Regiment. There are no double standards in the Regiment when it comes to physical and tactical skill requirements for senior leader; the selection process differs from that of the junior Soldiers, especially during the leadership- and psychological-assessment phases.

Without question, Dick Couch drew upon the physical stamina and mental toughness he developed as a SEAL as he went into the field for his research on this book. There is a saying in the Rangers that “you have to live hard to be hard.” The reader will fully appreciate the meaning of that saying and the ordeal that Dick went through to capture the training regimen of the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program and Ranger predeployment training. This is a fascinating book to read, even for the seasoned SOF operator. It is both factual and fast paced, and accompanied by numerous vignettes that make the reader feel he or she is there witnessing the training. Having had several tours with the Regiment, including one as the Regimental Commander, I felt a flood of memories while I read the book and reflected back on the most special time in my military career. *Sua Sponte* rekindled the pride I knew in serving with the very special patriots who make up the Regiment.

I have personally witnessed these magnificent warriors in combat. They are men of character and values, committed foremost to the mission but also to each other. Their training is both hard and realistic, and instills in them the confidence and the competence to succeed under the most stressful conditions. There is a standard for everything they do, and they hold themselves to that standard, never leaving a task until every member of the team has met it. This builds pride, cohesion, and professionalism. Discipline is demanded, and a Ranger takes personal pride in displaying that in all aspects of his duties. In holding themselves to this rigid standard, there is little room for compromise. Minor infractions can result in relief from the Regiment. The national mission currently assigned to

the Regiment demands discipline, obedience, ingenuity, and resourcefulness in addition to precise combat skills.

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But, as Dick Couch's book reveals, simply having the desire and physical attributes to be a Ranger are not enough to make it through selection. The Regiment wants not only Rangers who are professional operators and future leaders, but also intelligent team members with sound judgment and a moral foundation. The Regiment demands a quiet professional who will be an integral part of a cohesive team. As conditions change and evolve on the battlefield, mission requirements may exceed the orders given on the eve of the mission tasking. A Ranger must then understand the commander's intent and use his initiative and intellect to accomplish the mission within the rules of engagement and the laws of war. Character, intellect, and emotional stability are as important as physical and tactical prowess during the assessment of a Ranger candidate.

As the Honorary Colonel of the Regiment, I am indebted to Dick Couch for capturing the physical, mental, and emotional commitment of those who serve in the Regiment. I applaud the selfless dedication of the young soldiers who volunteer to be Rangers. And as a retired Ranger, I envy them their journey. They will live the Ranger Creed. They will be courageous and victorious on the battlefield. They will join a Band of Brothers who represent all that is noble and honorable in the warrior profession.

W. F. "Buck" Kernan  
General, USA (Ret.)

# PREFACE

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When people talk about the “Modern Rangers,” they are most often referring to the period of time since 1974, when the Ranger battalions were re-formed for the first time since World War II. General Creighton Abrams, then chief of staff of the Army, activated the Ranger battalions not to become an elite strike force, but rather to serve as a role model for what the Army *should* be. General Abrams envisioned that these new Ranger battalions, now the 75th Ranger Regiment, would train leaders that would return to the conventional Army to pass on their experience and expertise. They were activated to create change in the Army and to give leaders a professional example of what the Army could become. They have done that and more. The things that can be directly traced to the Ranger Regiment range from the universal use of the word *HOOAH*, to the concept “Training to Standard,” to family support groups, and even to the Soldier’s Creed. The Army’s current marksmanship, physical training combatives programs, and combat tactics all bear the mark of the 75th Rangers.

More than anything, the Rangers have produced leaders, leaders who continue to change the Army from bottom up, as evidenced by the number of command sergeant majors produced by the Regiment. At one time, unit leaders told former Regimental Ranger noncommissioned officers (NCOs), “This ain’t no Ranger Battalion, Sergeant, we can’t do that here,” because they didn’t think they could ask their soldiers to perform to Ranger standards. Over time, the Ranger standards became the Army standards as more Ranger leaders entered the force. The Army now realizes that competent leaders can ask for, and get, a higher professional standard.

All Rangers are leaders. Yet even among Ranger leaders, respect is earned, not given, no matter what the rank. That said, Ranger noncommissioned officers lead the way in the Regiment as perhaps nowhere else in the Army. Officer leaders rotate in and they rotate out, but the NCOs are always there. But NCO leadership has a price: meeting and exceeding the standard, year in and year out with no exceptions. Today in the Regiment, leadership means combat leadership. Few E-7 platoon sergeants in the 75th Ranger Regiment have less than *twelve combat rotations*. For these veteran combat leaders, the Ranger motto, “Rangers Lead the Way,” is more than just a saying. In addition to serving as a leadership laboratory, the Ranger Regiment became an elite strike force. It has been involved in every ground combat operation since the Vietnam War. It was one of the first units deployed in the Global War on Terrorism, going into action on October 19, 2001. The 75th Ranger Regiment has been continuously deployed ever since.

This work has special meaning to me as I am a Ranger to my core. I was with the 1st Ranger Battalion for sixteen years, beginning as a private soldier and moving up through the ranks to company first sergeant. I served four years as the Regimental Command Sergeant Major and eight more years as the Command Sergeant Major of the Ranger Regiment’s operational and administrative higher headquarters. My last assignment was as the senior enlisted adviser for the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. In 2010, just a few weeks before I retired, I had the privilege of accompanying the Rangers from the 2nd Ranger Battalion on an air assault mission to capture a high-value target. That final mission made me think how the Rangers had changed from what I knew as a young private in 1976. The uniforms, weapons, equipment, tactics, and mission sets were all drastically different. But one thing remained constant, unchanged: A Ranger is a Ranger, first and foremost, no matter his rank, military occupational specialty, or duty position. There is something

that is unique about a Ranger. I can still pick one out of any crowd, day or night.

There is a saying in the Rangers: “It’s easy to make it into the Regiment, but the hard part is maintaining the standard *every* single day.” Dick Couch captures this, and why it is unique in this organization. *Sua Sponte* begins with recruiting the right men, training them to standard, and then insisting that they live up to that standard in garrison and in their personal lives. This is important; the assessment of a Ranger in the Regiment is never over and is never taken for granted.

There are no big secrets in the life of a regimental Ranger—no formula locked away in some vault to which only a select few have access. The standards haven’t changed significantly since 1974. It matters not if you are the Regimental Commander, a Command Sergeant Major, a chaplain’s assistant, a rifle-platoon sergeant, a cook, or a new infantry private. All are bound by the Ranger standard. Many soldiers do not make it through the initial assessment process, and many more are released for failing to maintain a Ranger standard. The attrition rate is high, as it has been since Major William O. Darby ran the first “selection and assessment” for the World War II Rangers. There’s another saying in the Regiment: “You earn your [Ranger] Scroll every day.” The Scroll of the 75th Ranger Regiment, as you will see in this book, is difficult to earn. Once earned, it is also difficult to live up to, but the standards of those who soldier with the 75th Ranger Regiment are both exacting and inflexible.

Dick begins his text with a history of the Rangers. Our history is extremely important to us. Our roots are deep and dated; they precede the founding of our nation. Yet even before the chapter on Ranger history, there is the Ranger Creed. For a Ranger, these are sacred words. The Ranger Creed was not intended to be just a poem to memorize for recitation; it is a way of life. It’s how Rangers live; it’s who they are and who they will be for the rest of their lives. During the battle for the Haditha Dam in Iraq in late March 2003, a Republican Guard counterattack left a 3rd Battalion Ranger severely wounded. On reaching the wounded man where he had fallen, his Command Sergeant Major found that he had a large piece of fragmentation protruding from the side of his head. In spite of the severity of his condition, he was quietly reciting the Ranger Creed to keep calm. I can think of no more forceful commentary on the strength and courage of a young Ranger, nor of the power of the Ranger Creed.

Rangers are individuals—as people, as soldiers, and as warriors. They have individual strengths, weaknesses, and, yes, egos. Yet their enduring quality is to merge these personal traits into a collective standard of excellence. Rangers let their actions speak for themselves, and perhaps at no point in their modern history have they spoken so eloquently as with their ongoing combat rotations into the active theaters. We may not be a nation at war, but the 75th Rangers are a regiment at war. It was my honor and privilege to serve with the 75th Ranger Regiment. And thank you, Dick Couch, for your fine work in telling our story.

Michael Hall  
Command Sergeant Major, USA (Ret.)

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## THE RANGER CREED

**R**ecognizing that I volunteered as a Ranger, fully knowing the hazards of my profession, I will always endeavor to uphold the prestige, honor, and high esprit de corps of my Ranger Regiment.

**A**cknowledging the fact that a Ranger is a more elite soldier, who arrives at the cutting edge of a battle by land, sea or air, I accept the fact that as a Ranger, my country expects me to move further, faster, and fight harder than any other soldier.

**N**ever shall I ever fail my comrades. I will always keep myself mentally alert, physically strong, and morally straight, and I will shoulder more than my share of the task, whatever it may be, one hundred percent and then some.

**G**allantly will I show the world that I am a specially selected and well trained soldier. My courtesy to superiors, my neatness of dress, and my care of my equipment shall set the example for others to follow.

**E**nergetically will I meet the enemies of my country. I shall defeat them on the field of battle for I am better trained and will fight them with all my might. Surrender is not a Ranger word. I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy and under no circumstances will I ever embarrass my country.

**R**eadily will I display the intestinal fortitude required to fight on to the Ranger objective and complete the mission, though I be the lone survivor.

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# AN INTRODUCTION

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Kaihan huddled close to the small fire with his father, two of his uncles, and one of his many brothers. This was the first time he had been allowed to accompany the older men of the family who were all seasoned fighters. They had just harvested the poppies that were well on their journey to becoming heroin to satisfy the addictions of the nonbelievers in the West. It was now time for jihad, and Kaihan took no small amount of pride to be an apprentice warrior in the service of Islam. Next month he would be fifteen. He and the others had been three weeks on their pilgrimage from their fields to the south, having left their village shortly after the devastating attacks on America. Kaihan now sat as an equal with the others, wearing a threadbare *chapan* coat, a castoff from a cousin who had died in the fighting, and a *pakol* hat that was too big, but could be pulled down to cover the tops of his ears for warmth. He tugged self-consciously at his sparse beard, hoping that it would soon grow long and thick like those of his elders. The only thing about Kaihan that was clean was his Kalashnikov rifle that had been wiped so often that much of the blueing had been rubbed away. He squatted close to the fire with the weapon between his knees, gripping the polished forestock. All the men kept their weapons close at hand, and Kaihan especially so. This rifle, with its curved thirty-round magazine and distinctive over-the-barrel gas piston tube, was a symbol of Kaihan's commitment to Allah and his manhood.

Their duty was to help provide security for the imam's compound located just west of Kandahar. They had never entered the compound itself, but each day one of the women brought food out for them. The men camped a few hundred yards from the compound by night and took shelter in a nearby wadi during the day. The imam was the spiritual leader of the Taliban, and it was a great honor that their family had been tasked to help with security. Their sector was to the north of the walled structure, where they now huddled around the small fire. Kaihan's job during the day was to gather sticks and brush, enough for a small fire to keep the tea hot throughout the night and a little warmth for the cold hours just before dawn.

They talked about the attacks on America that had taken place a little more than a month earlier. How would the Americans respond? How long would it take them to recover from the blow? Would they ever recover, or had the brave martyrs who had perished in the attacks mortally wounded that decadent nation? Only time would tell, but surely anything the Americans could do would take a while. Had the damage to their great cities been unprecedented? Were the Americans not on the other side of the world, across great oceans? Seated around the fire, they also talked of the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance. He had been slain the day before the attacks on America. Praise be to Allah and to his servant Osama who had orchestrated these crushing defeats on their enemies. *Am I not fortunate, Kaihan thought, to be a soldier in the Army of God at such an exciting time?*

Uncle Faheem heard it first, cocking his head to one side and raising a hand for silence. It was a murmur, then a soft growl but growing louder. It seemed to be coming from the east and getting nearer at a fast pace. Without a sound, Kaihan's father kicked dirt over the small fire and the five rose as one to listen.

"There," said Uncle Jawid, pointing to the sky east of the compound. It was a dark night, but they could make out three—now four—shapes coming over the horizon. They were evenly spaced and quite low—low enough for the shapes to begin sprouting wings as they drew closer. They were large

aircraft. Then Kaihan saw small dark forms begin to blossom from the rear of each.

“Parachutists,” his father said. “Parsa, take your brother to the rally point and wait for us there. Now!”

Parsa, two years older than Kaihan and a veteran fighter, grabbed Kaihan by the cuff of his coat and pulled him away. Kaihan followed without protest; their father’s commands were to be obeyed without question. Like all good Pashtun fighters, their father had designated a safe place for them to meet should they be separated in battle. This place was a sheltered, shallow rocky rise a half mile from the compound. Kaihan glanced over his shoulder and saw his father and uncles, now just dark forms, moving in a line abreast toward the compound. He wished he were with them, knowing that if there was to be fighting, they would be a part of it and he would not. Yet there was little time to think as Parsa drew him away from the compound. Kaihan would never see his father or uncles alive again.

Throughout the night, Kaihan and Parsa heard the rattle of machine-gun fire and an occasional explosion. Off to the north and west, they heard the sounds of jet aircraft and the distant *krump* of bombs. As dawn broke, they each in turn surveyed the compound through Parsa’s binoculars. They were Russian binoculars and one of his brother’s prized possessions. As Kaihan looked down from their hiding site, he could see armed men in security positions around the compound and others patrolling near the walls. On a short pole atop one building in the compound a flag was flying. It had not been there the previous day. In the growing light, Kaihan was able to make out the stripes and cluster of stars of an American flag, their hated symbol. *So it was the Americans*, Kaihan marveled to himself. *How did they get here so swiftly? How could they come so far and at night, without warning, and parachute onto the compound of their leader?*

Kaihan and Parsa watched throughout the day. They watched as the Americans moved freely throughout the compound. They watched later that afternoon as the large transports landed and took the soldiers back aboard and left. Just before dark, the two boys made their way down to the deserted compound. They found the bodies of their father and uncles, but their weapons were gone. They had been laid out with some reverence and covered with blankets. After burying them, the two brothers made their way back to their village with the sad news. The grief of the extended family was intense but brief—such was their way of life. Within the year, both Kaihan and Parsa would be dead. Parsa would be killed by Northern Alliance fighters outside Kandahar as they and their Army Special Forces allies swept down from Turkmenistan. Kaihan would die from a 105-millimeter cannon round fired from a special operations AC-130 gunship while he and several others slept in what they thought was a safe building. They, too, would be buried in hasty, shallow graves by their younger brothers and cousins, who would then take up the fight. One of them would have the Kalashnikov rifle Kaihan kept so clean; another, Parsa’s Russian binoculars. They would be brave and fight well, yet most would die in the struggle.

The above account is, of course, fictional. The fact that the American response to the attacks of 9/11 was swift and highly professional is not. On the night of October 19, 2001, scarcely a month after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the U.S. Special Operations Command conducted a bold raid on the compound of the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, near Kandahar in Afghanistan. The centerpiece of this action was a night parachute drop of close to two hundred Rangers from the 3rd Battalion of the 75th Ranger Regiment—the first boots on the ground, in force, in what we now call the Global War on Terrorism. These Rangers flew halfway around the world to make this combat drop from a Special Operations MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft at eight hundred feet—quite an undertaking. That it took so much time—five weeks—for America to respond after the attacks of 9/11 had to do with intelligence, targeting, and political considerations. The Rangers of the 3rd Battalion, in accordance with their standing orders, were ready to make that combat drop eighteen



hours after the first plane hit the towers in New York. A single company of the 3rd Battalion was on a nine-hour standby. As America's premier light-infantry force, the 75th Ranger Regiment keeps one of its three rifle battalions on this kind of alert status 24/7. It was true then as it is today. This on-call requirement is in addition to their keeping a full battalion or a full battalion plus deployed in the active theater and in harm's way. Their mantra, "Rangers Lead the Way," is not just a slogan; it is a way of life.

On one hand, the raid on Mullah Omar's compound accomplished little. The imam was not in residence and there was very little of significant intelligence value retrieved from the compound. A few Taliban fighters in the area were killed and a few Rangers injured in the night parachute operation. Yet the message sent to the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership was quite clear; anytime, anywhere, and under any conditions, you may be visited by tough and capable American warriors. Most likely, they will come at night in inclement weather. If you are unfortunate enough to be present when they arrive, you will be captured or killed. Most likely those warriors will be American special operators, and there is a good probability those special operators will be Rangers—anytime, anywhere, day or night, and under any conditions.

All military organizations are cultures. The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps are separate and distinct cultures, as is the U.S. Special Operations Command. Within the SPECOPs Command reside the minicultures of the service-centric components that make up America's special operations forces, or SOF. Those primary SOF elements engaged in ground combat are the Green Berets, the SEALs, the Marine Special Operations Regiment, and the Rangers, along with the highly classified special mission units of the Joint Special Operations Command. This work is focused on the story of the Rangers: where they come from, their storied past, their current deployment posture, their rigorous training, and, above all, their culture—part brotherhood, part family, and all warrior.

There is a good deal of misunderstanding about the individual roles of our SOF ground-combat components and their mission sets. What are their primary and secondary missions, and when, if ever, do these missions overlap? And what are they doing today now that the active combat rotations have shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan? Let's first talk about Army Special Forces—the Green Berets. They have broad military training and can serve as raiders in a direct-action role, but their *primary* role is that of a counterinsurgent and unconventional-warfare force. Special Forces were the ones who helped to mobilize the Northern Alliance that took Afghanistan in a matter of months—something the Russians failed to do in a decade of fighting. The seizing of all Afghanistan by Afghan tribal fighters under the standard of the Northern Alliance, assisted by Army Special Forces and a generous dose of American air power, is considered a classic unconventional-warfare operation. These same Green Berets were the ones who helped to train the Iraqis to deal with insurgents during the long aftermath following the fall of Saddam Hussein. This counterinsurgency role is also called foreign internal defense. Theirs is a "by, with, and through" discipline that demands language and cross-cultural skill sets. Special Forces have to work well with others. In my book *Chosen Soldier*, I describe the Army Special Forces soldier as the most valuable individual on the battlefield. In today's insurgent battlespace, I stand by that statement. It takes a special individual to be a Green Beret—and it takes a long time to train one. Special Forces training, along with language and medical or specialty training, can take from eighteen to thirty-six months. Unconventional-warfare and counterinsurgency operations are difficult and nuanced, and the warriors who practice this vital and demanding work are among our most skilled special operators.

Also on the ground in the current fight are the Navy SEALs. The acronym SEAL stands for sea-air-land, and SEALs are trained to move and fight in all three mediums. While they are the primary maritime proponents of the U.S. Special Operations Command, they have a broad skill set and do

quite well on land. SEALs, like their brother special operators, have been deployed continuously in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are a versatile force and able to conduct the full range of special operations, including direct-action raids, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, and counterinsurgency. They are at home high in the Hindu Kush, just as they are in the water. While they are capable generalists, their specialty is direct action and special reconnaissance in littoral or maritime environments. Due to this broad, versatile skill set and their lengthy maritime-centric training, it takes thirty-six months to make a U.S. Navy SEAL out of a U.S. Navy sailor, and to prepare him for combat deployment. Both SEALs and Special Forces, by the nature of their specialty training and mission taskings, are long lead-time items. They are expensive to train, and the attrition rates of their lengthy training pipelines are horrific. Only about one in four make it through SEAL or Special Forces training.

Before moving onto the focus of this book, the Army Rangers, I'll briefly mention the other two SOF ground-combat components. The first is the Marine Special Operations Command, or MARSOC. The MARSOC is relatively new to the U.S. Special Operations Command force mix in that it was commissioned as a SOCOM component in February 2006. Our MARSOC is currently a regimental-sized force that specializes in direct action, special reconnaissance, and foreign internal defense. The force draws heavily on Marine reconnaissance units and while the MARSOC is unique in much of its training and force projection, its mission set and deployment posture most closely resemble that of Army Special Forces. The core, a seven-month Marine special operations training course, has similarities to the Green Beret's training. The other special operations component or components operating on the ground in the active theaters are the special mission units that collectively train and deploy as elements of the Joint Special Operations Command. The mission set and operational responsibilities of the special mission units are beyond the scope and classification of this work. These secret and highly specialized elements recruit their personnel from veterans of the other SOF ground-combat components.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the SOF aviation components. The Air Force Special Operations Command and the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) are well staffed with experienced and talented aviators. They fly fixed and rotary-wing special operation platforms, and support their SOF brothers on the ground as well as conduct special operations missions on their own. They, too, have been on continuous combat rotation into the battlespace since 9/11.

With this brief primer on U.S. special operations ground-combat elements, we now turn our attention to the Rangers—specifically, the 75th Ranger Regiment. The Regiment enjoys a much narrower and more focused mission than its brother SOF combatants. While Rangers may be called on to support other disciplines and mission sets, they are pure raiders. As a primary skill set, they do not train allied soldiers in foreign internal defense, nor do they conduct unconventional-warfare operations. They are not called upon to conduct routine patrols or engage in special reconnaissance. Their counterinsurgent duties primarily involve tracking down enemy fighters, and capturing them or killing them. As the Rangers are called on to do little else, they are able to execute their direct-action mission responsibilities very well. During operations in Iraq, and now exclusively in Afghanistan, they are usually tasked to conduct raids as small units, but they also train to conduct large-scale raids as well. One of their primary missions is the seizure of enemy airfields, which are often preceded with a company-sized parachute drop, not unlike the one on Mullah Omar's compound. Ongoing requirements in the active theaters have downsized the types of operational raids Rangers routinely carry out, but these current operations have not relieved the Regiment of its airfield-capture responsibilities. The on-call Ranger battalion must be ready to launch within eighteen hours for enemy-airfield capture—again, anywhere and anytime.

Airfield seizure is more of a large-scale, maneuver-warfare capability—something more suited to the Cold War or as a part of an invasion operation. Yet the 75th Ranger Regiment still makes time in its busy training/deployment schedule to keep this mission skill current. It requires time and a great deal of professionalism to conduct this kind of large-scale raid, for it would most certainly be done at night and in the face of stiff opposition. Operations like this fall into the category of high-risk undertakings. So one might think that given the current focus on small-unit tactics in an insurgent environment, why would the Rangers bother with this kind of mass-parachute operation? There are good reasons. Should the government of Pakistan fall into the hands of extremists and American policy makers not wish the Pakistani nuclear arsenal to be in the hands of those extremists, who would we send on a recovery mission? If we were to need boots-on-the-ground evidence of Iran's nuclear weapons development, what unit is best suited to seize, secure, and hold a nuclear bomb factory for a few hours to get that information? And if an American embassy is under siege and the local government is unable to control the mob that threatens Americans in that embassy, what force can we get there in a hurry to save those lives? The 75th Ranger Regiment represents an important light-infantry, on-call response capability that is unique in our military.

Yet, for now, the business currently at hand is counterinsurgency, and that business, primarily in Afghanistan, requires that we win the people to our side. It has been stated many ways and certainly in more complex terms, but the premise of a counterinsurgency campaign is a three-phase undertaking: clear, hold, build. Insurgents must first be cleared from the area. The area must then be held in such a way that the insurgents cannot return and hide amid the local population and exert their control over the people. Basically, there has to be security; the people have to be free of intimidation by the insurgents. And, finally, there's the building process—building schools, building relationships, and building trust in the local government. The clearing process is pretty straightforward; it often means targeting insurgent leaders and fighters, and killing them. Both the holding and the building are difficult, time-consuming, expensive, frustrating, and dangerous work. Holding often involves patrolling the streets and maintaining a visible presence to provide security. It also involves training the local police forces in security operations. Building efforts have to be done in concert with the local leaders and officials on *their* terms—within the context of the local customs and culture. Holding and building are the stock and trade of Army Special Forces. The SEALs have been pressed into this important work, though most SEALs would rather be tasked with direct-action missions than working with local security forces. The Marine Corps, with its small-wars approach to the business of counterinsurgency, prides itself on doing all three—at the same time.

Rangers focus on the clearing process. They are not involved with training the locals or conducting security patrols or building infrastructure. Here again, they are pure raiders, and their work, while dangerous, is rather straightforward. They capture and kill insurgents, and disrupt insurgent operations. This requires neither the language and cross-cultural skills of Special Forces (or SOF Marines) nor the multidimensional/maritime skill set of the SEALs. Theirs is a basic direct-action mission set. In many ways, what the Rangers were asked to do before 9/11 and what they do today has changed little. They train in all forms of airborne and mobile tactical assault. This training focuses on what the Rangers call the Big Five: mobility, marksmanship, medical (first aid), physical fitness, and battle drills. Their art is the raider's art, and they are very good at it.

In speaking to the simplicity of the Rangers' direct-action calling, this does not imply that it does not take a great deal of professionalism and discipline to do it well. A professional football team or a ballet troop moves from competence to excellence with practice and drill. To stay with the sports analogy, there is a certain amount of elegance in a run-oriented offense moving the football down the field. Execution is everything. Even if the defense knows what you're going to do, it cannot stop you. This kind of precision comes from a commitment to precision, individually and as a team, that can

only be achieved with drill, repetition, and close attention to detail. It's the same with combat assault

Perhaps the most startling aspect of Ranger work when compared with that of Army Special Force and Navy SEALs is the relatively short period of time required to train and deploy a combat-capable Army Ranger. When compared with unconventional warfare and counterinsurgency, the assault business is a simple business. Dangerous and stressful, yes, but again, straightforward. A young man graduating high school in the spring of his senior year may find himself in the middle of a combat to as an Army Ranger on the one-year anniversary of his high school graduation. For a Green Beret or a SEAL, it may be as long as three years before he enters the fight.

*Sua Sponte* is the story of how the 75th Ranger Regiment selects, trains, and prepares a young Ranger for this difficult and deadly work. It is a professional process and a cultural transformation that goes to the core of this unique warrior brotherhood. The process first seeks to find those young men who have the heart and the physical capacity to become Rangers. Then these same men are vetted to see if they have the aptitude and personal discipline to play their role on a combat assault team. It is both a screening and a rite of passage.

Before continuing, let me take a minute to clarify an important distinction between a Ranger who serves in the 75th Ranger Regiment and a soldier who is "Ranger Qualified" by way of his completion of Ranger School. Rangers who serve in the 75th Regiment are assessed, selected, and trained in the Regiment's Ranger Assessment and Selection Program, or RASP. A good deal of *Sua Sponte* is about the unique and challenging RASP process. Ranger School is conducted by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, and is the Army's premier combat-leadership school. It teaches young officers and soldiers that they can fight and lead even though they've had little to eat and have not slept for several days. Ranger School has been called sixty-one days of hell. Those who complete this important and difficult leadership course are awarded the Ranger Tab. While there are few books on regimental Ranger training, a great deal has been written about this school. Only about 45 percent of those who enroll in Ranger School earn the Tab. Since the school began in 1950, twenty-seven soldiers have been killed during this difficult and demanding training.

There has been a great deal of misunderstanding regarding Ranger School and its important role in the regular Army, and the role of the school as it applies to the 75th Ranger Regiment. Few outside the Army really know or understand the difference. Ranger School occupies a unique place in the Army unlike any other school in any other service. For an Army officer, especially for an Infantry Branch or Armor Branch officer, the Tab—that little strip of khaki cloth awarded those who complete Ranger School—is a career maker or a career breaker. Any soldier (or sailor or marine, as SEALs and marines attend Ranger School on a limited basis) who completes the school has earned the right to call himself a Ranger. There are young privates who proudly wear the Ranger Tab on the shoulder of their uniform, so do most generals in the Army. Most of those who complete Ranger School and are awarded the coveted Ranger School Tab *do not* serve in the 75th Ranger Regiment.

Yet, in many ways, Ranger School is what binds the Regiment to the rest of the U.S. Army. To serve in the Regiment, a soldier must complete RASP; to stay in the Regiment and to be a leader in the Regiment, a Ranger must earn the Ranger Tab. Often, a young soldier will complete RASP and make one or more Ranger deployments *before* he attends Ranger School. Those soldiers who complete RASP are awarded the Tan Beret and the Regimental Scroll. Then there is the Tab that they award to Ranger School graduates. Both are hard to come by, and both define what it is to be a Ranger. There is a saying in the Regiment: "The Tab is the school but the Scroll is a way of life." Yet without the Tab, life in the Regiment ceases.

While a portion of this book will address Ranger School, *Sua Sponte* is the story of the forging of those battle-ready Rangers who will serve in the Regiment. It is about the assessment, selection, and training of our nation's most capable warriors. It tells about the transformation that must take place for a soldier to be a part of the unique culture that is the 75th Ranger Regiment. *Sua Sponte* follows this journey step by step—a journey that only about one in four survive to go on to serve as Rangers in this storied Regiment. As the first writer granted unlimited access to the 75th Ranger Regiment and its training, I am very privileged to have the opportunity to tell its story.

No U.S. military unit can claim a longer or more storied history than the 75th Rangers. In the first chapter, we will learn about this history and the remarkable traditions that our modern Rangers carry with them into the current fight.

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## RANGER HISTORY

Life in America during colonial times was hazardous business. In addition to making their way in this harsh and untamed land, there were hostile Indians to deal with. The new settlers farmed and hunted, and they also felled trees to build stockades to protect themselves from Indian attacks. Much of the early life of the white man in America was spent well bunkered behind protective walls. Danger lurked outside the fortifications as Indians, skilled in stalking game and tribal warfare, would often lie in wait for these new colonists. Those tilling the ground, even near the stockade, were targets, as were hunting parties searching for game nearby. A trip to the stream for water could invite attack.

By 1630, scarcely two decades after the founding of Jamestown, established colonists in Maryland and Virginia began to organize and hire groups of men to patrol the perimeters of their holdings as a means of early warning against Indian attack. Many military historians hold that these defensive measures were the first Ranger-type operations conducted in America.

The first offensive ranger operations in the New World, aside from those conducted by the Native Americans themselves, took place in Massachusetts. In 1675, a particularly skilled and aggressive Indian chief named Metacomet of the Wampanoag tribe began savaging the colonists there with lightning-fast hit-and-run raids. To counter these raids, Governor Josiah Winslow of the Plymouth Colony commissioned his principal aide, Benjamin Church, to take action. Church, a carpenter by trade, raised a company of men and began ranging out from the settlements to conduct scouting operations against Metacomet and his war parties. Eventually, with the help of recruited friendly Indians, Captain Church began to attack the Wampanoag villages. In a series of actions known as King Philip's War (Metacomet was known locally as King Philip), Church was able to take the fight to the enemy. These scouting and raiding actions continued for three years, ending with the capture and execution of Metacomet. In describing the scouting and reconnaissance activity of Church's mixed force, there appeared written reports that stated, "Today we ranged out four miles to the west," and the term *Ranger* was born.

It was not until three-quarters of a century later that the first by-name Ranger unit was formed. This took place prior to the French and Indian War (1754–1763) with the forming of His Majesty's First Independent Company of American Rangers in 1747. The French and Indian War was an American extension of the Seven Years' War between England and France. The New World version of this conflict pitted the New England colonists against the French Canadians and their native allies. This first true Ranger company was recruited and formed by a frontiersman named Robert Rogers. After forming the first Ranger company, Rogers went on to form nine additional companies of Rangers that took the fight and the British cause deep into territory claimed by the French. His campaign leadership in those uncertain times is an important part of modern Ranger lore. These first Rangers were brought to the attention of most Americans in the 1940 film *Northwest Passage*, starring Spencer Tracy and Robert Young. Like other military leaders in the fledgling colonies, Rogers was a compelling and enigmatic figure who stamped his fighters with his own personality; they were his "Rogers' Rangers." An early and perhaps somewhat embellished description of the American Ranger and this first Ranger leader was an account by Joseph B. Walker that appeared in the Massachusetts publication *Bay State Monthly* in 1885:

*He was a man of vigorous constitution, inured to the hardships of forest life. He was capable of long marches, day after day, upon scant rations, refreshed by short intervals of sleep while rolled in his blanket upon a pile of boughs, with no other*

shelter but the sky. He knew the trails of the Indians, as well as their ordinary haunts and likeliest places of ambush. He knew, also, all the courses of the streams and the carrying places between them. He understood Indian wiles and warfare, and was prepared to meet them.

Stand such a man in a pair of stout shoes or moccasins; cover his lower limbs with leggins and coarse small clothes; give him a close-fitting jacket and a warm cap; stick a small hatchet in his belt; and a good-sized powder-horn by his side, and upon his back buckle a blanket and a knapsack stuffed with a moderate supply of bread and raw salt pork; to these furnishings add a good-sized hunting-knife, a trusty musket and a small flask of spirits, and you have an average New Hampshire Ranger of the Seven Year's War, ready for skirmish or pitched battle; or for the more common duty of reconnoitering the enemy's force and movements, of capturing his scouts and provision trains, and getting now and then a prisoner, from whom all information possible would be extorted; and, in short, for annoying the French and Indian foe in every possible way.

If you will add three or four inches to the average height of such a soldier, give him consummate courage, coolness, readiness of resource in extremities, together with intuitive knowledge of the enemy's wiles, supplemented with a passable knowledge of French and Indian speech, you will have a tolerable portrait of Captain Robert Rogers at the beginning of our Seven Year's War.

Following the French and Indian War and into the American Revolution, Robert Rogers's life became a series of misfortunes. Rogers was in and out of prison and in and out of favor with both British and American authorities. He served as a British officer for a short time during the Revolution and helped to unmask and capture Nathan Hale, the famous American patriot who was hanged as a spy. At the time of his death, Nathan Hale was also serving in a Continental Ranger company. Robert Rogers died penniless and in obscurity in 1795. One of the factors that propelled him into financial ruin was that during the French and Indian War, he paid his men out of his own pocket.

Today's modern Rangers can trace their roots and heritage back to this bold, charismatic, and perhaps tragic figure. In addition to his contributions to small-unit tactics and an intrepid campaign history, he left us (among other military publications) *Robert Rogers' 28 Rules of Ranging*. He also left us with his Rogers' Rangers Standing Orders, which is quoted in the front of every edition of the *Ranger Handbook*, right after the Ranger Creed, and repeated here.

#### **ROGERS' RANGERS STANDING ORDERS**

1. Don't forget nothing.
2. Have your musket clean as a whistle, hatchet scoured, sixty rounds of powder and ball, and be ready to move at a minute's warning.
3. When you are 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 never lie to an Officer or Ranger.
5. Don't never take a chance you don't have to.
6. When we're on the march, we march single file, far enough apart so one shot can't go through 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 until dark so as to give the enemy the least possible 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 till we have had time to examine them so they can't cook up a story between 'em.
11. Don't ever march home 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 will be told where to meet if surrounded by a superior force.
14. Don't sit down to eat without posting sentries.
15. Don't sleep beyond dawn; dawn's when the French and Indians attack.
16. Don't cross a river by a regular ford.

17. If somebody's trailing you, make a circle, come back onto your own trail, and ambush the folks that aim to ambush you.

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18. Don't stand up when the enemy's coming against you. Kneel down, lie down, hide behind a tree.

19. Let the enemy come till he's close enough to touch. Then let him have it and jump out and finish him up with your hatchet.

*Major Robert Rogers, 1759*

In 1775, the Continental Congress authorized the formation of a number of companies of expert riflemen. George Washington was to later call these companies the Corps of Rangers, but the term *Ranger* was seldom used during the revolution. One might have thought the colonists would have turned to Robert Rogers, a proven leader, when forming such a force. Rogers offered his services, but Washington turned him down. As a former British officer, Washington did not trust him. The general sought leaders who had no ties to the British. Leading one of these new rifle companies was a tough Virginian and former teamster named Daniel Morgan. Morgan was a big man, with a history of drinking and gambling, and a deep-seated dislike for the British army, which once had him flogged to the point of near death. He was poorly educated, but he had a natural flare for unconventional warfare and tactical maneuver. Captain Daniel Morgan led his sharpshooters from Virginia on a forced march to help relieve the colonists in the Siege of Boston. He participated in the Battle of Quebec, during which he was taken prisoner. He was later repatriated, and went on to serve in a prominent role in the Battle of Saratoga. For his service at Saratoga, Morgan was promoted to colonel and given a regimental command in the Continental Army that included a five-hundred-man unit of select marksmen to be used as light infantry. Morgan put them to good use as a reconnaissance force and for harassment and interdiction of British supply lines. During the course of the war, he became adept at using light infantry, irregular forces, and sharpshooters in support of main-force engagements.

We now remember Morgan for his direction of the American victory at the Battle of Cowpens in January 1781, a battle that ended a series of British victories in the southern colonies. His orders were to harass the British, not confront them. In direct violation of those orders, he used his sharpshooters and militia troops to lure a regiment of British infantry onto ground of his choosing. Morgan ordered his irregulars to fire a volley, then fall back. Morgan knew that the British regiment was commanded by the brash Colonel Banastre Tarleton, who had a low opinion of irregular troops. When the Continental irregulars gave ground, Tarleton, as Morgan anticipated, ordered a charge. As the redcoats charged, Morgan's Virginia sharpshooters raked the leading elements of Tarleton's light infantry, halting their advance. This allowed Morgan to conduct a double envelopment of the British main body with his own light infantry and all but annihilate the British regiment. Tarleton escaped, but of his eleven-hundred-man force, two hundred were killed and more than eight hundred captured, along with the entire British supply train. It was *the* tactical gem of the war, and one of the few times a double envelopment has been employed in modern military warfare.

Following the Revolution, Daniel Morgan was recalled to active service, during which he led the militia in the Whiskey Rebellion and put down the insurrection without firing a shot. He served two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives and died in July 1802. As an interesting historical aside, this early Ranger leader was a relative of the famous privateer and pirate Henry Morgan.

Much of early Ranger lore seems to be tied to noted unconventional and charismatic military leaders, and the person of Colonel Francis Marion is no exception. Marion, widely known as the Swamp Fox, conducted a guerrilla-type campaign in South Carolina during the Revolutionary War. He was born a South Carolinian and grew up in Georgetown, South Carolina, at the time a thriving seaport. Marion was a sickly child, but, encouraged by his parents, he went to sea on a trading schooner at the age of fifteen. The schooner foundered after being struck by a whale and young



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