

Forty-Eight X

Chapter 1

There are staccato moments that are life changing, sometimes world changing -- a single step taken, a yes, a no, a signature, a nod, the swift pull of a trigger. Lawrence McGraw's life had been full of such moments. Now was to be another.

His special troops were trained to complete their assignment in eight minutes. Not a minute more. Since beginning his mission, he'd focused on time. Success was a matter of discipline, training, and precision. All had been rehearsed -- a hundred, no a thousand times. Little Boy, the first atom bomb, took less than one minute from "bombs away" on the Enola Gay to its detonation over Hiroshima. One minute to change the world. Link McGraw was going to do it in eight minutes, but it would be no less momentous.

Colonel Lawrence "Link" McGraw crouched on a wooded hilltop, careful to remain unseen. Behind him, a purple hew still hung to the tops of the Hindu Kush Mountains as a setting sun buried itself. Below him, only a few flickering kerosene lamps still illuminated a dozen mud huts in a no-man's land village along the porous frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Smoke drifting from the chimney of one of the houses creased the black night sky. A few derelict vehicles lay scattered about, mechanical vegetation in a barren terrain. The night was dark, overcast, moonless. He had chosen it that way.

McGraw wiped sweat from his brow, streaking his camouflage paint. Thirty-six years old, he still fit the image of the steely-eyed, ramrod straight, invincible soldier the army liked to portray on its recruiting posters. His forehead and his cheeks were high, his nose prominent with just a hint of an aquiline bump, and his face was tanned and leathery but creased only at the corners of his eyes, which made his green eyed gaze seem ever so more piercing. He felt anxious but not fearful though he knew the next few minutes would be the turning point in his life. Fail here and he would die or, perhaps worse, return to that cold ten-by-ten foot cage at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas where he had been imprisoned for nearly a year. Succeed and he would be well on the road to regaining his most prized position, his honor. But there was far more at stake in these moments.

"We've got a chance here to change the nature of war," his commander, General Mack Shell had admonished him. "To change the way men have fought for millenniums; to put an end to our young men fighting and dying in war after war."

Although his troops had come to kill, they had no concept of sin. McGraw's soldiers sat still, shoulder to shoulder in the dark confines of an M113 armored personnel carrier, gazing vacantly dead ahead. The hot, dank air felt like a steam cooker, but there was no grumbling, not a sound, except for their steady, almost synchronized breathing. McGraw unlocked the rear hatch of the M113 and they quickly, silently deployed, gathering ghost-like around him, their faces swallowed in the darkness, all but the eerie glow of their eyes. He flashed four fingers on one hand and then four fingers on both hands, four and

eight. "Forty-eight," was the signaled command. They obeyed immediately, readying their specially designed weapons just as he had trained them over the past several months. Forty-eight also stood for the unique genetic code that identified the special nature of these extraordinary troops that he was sending into battle for the first time.

An ancient stone culvert led from his position to the target, a kilometer away. One of his troops kicked at a plastic bag floating in the jetsam of the canal. Several rats scurried past, and the entire platoon gazed after them. Perhaps they just needed to be a little distracted, to feel a little calm before the storm. But McGraw still wondered if they were ready. Forty-eight, he signaled again, reclaiming their attention as they heard the faint snap of his fingers.

McGraw swept his palm across the head of his platoon leader as a gesture of confidence and reassurance. Then he held up one finger for a moment. With that signal, their very breath seemed to stop. He then simply pointed and his troops were gone in an instant. McGraw followed for about a hundred meters to watch their progress but, like a bomb dropped, he knew he couldn't recall them and couldn't join them, so he returned.

He illuminated his wrist watch and watched the second hand throb like his heartbeat. There was nothing much left for him to do but sit and wait. He wasn't the praying kind. He didn't believe in supernatural intervention, just training and more training, the right intelligence, and the right weapons. Victory in war, he knew, did not come to gods; it came to flesh and blood soldiers.

"The history of men at war is writ large with stories of heroes," General Shell had said before sending him off, "stories of young men who fight and often die for noble, sometimes ignoble causes. Their actions sometimes elevate them to superhuman or biblical status. They become the legend of an overmatched David defeating a Goliath; a blind and bound Samson defeating the haughty Philistines. But remember glory is fleeting and the ends of war for survivors are most often filled with nightmares, with trinkets of ribbons and medals, and uniforms which will soon no longer fit." The general then paused fitfully. "Put an end to it, Link," he said, pressing on McGraw the firmest of handshakes.

That farewell speech reminded McGraw of his own heroes:

Sidney Coulter, Eagle scout, valedictorian, age 19, died in battle, Amsar, Afghanistan.

Jaime Garza, Mexican immigrant, father of two, age 24, died by RPG, Ramal.

Richard Neilson, car salesman, poker player extraordinaire, age 20, died by IED, Baghdad.

There were plenty, too many, more. Perhaps with this success, he thought, there would soon be no more.

McGraw had made one adjustment on the eve of battle that he knew his general would have frowned upon. He had given each of his troops a shot of brandy. Not enough

to get drunk but enough to slightly dull the frontal cortex that controls executive functioning, that area of the brain that breeds doubt. A little alcohol, he believed, allowed one to think more simply, to dull the noises on the periphery. He took his own swig of the red from his canteen. He too needed to dull his doubts.

The village he was attacking was a terrorist camp and the men there were not novices and not innocent. They were well trained soldiers who had killed many times before. They not only professed that they were unafraid to die, but that they were eager to die for their cause.

The guard on the observation tower at the edge of the village was vigilant but he could never have imagined an enemy so furtive. Four razor sharp blades sliced through the back of his neck like a guillotine, severing his spinal cord just below the second vertebrae. He heard his own body loudly thump to the floor and had only a split second to be astonished at the sight of his executioner before consciousness and then life left him. The guard's death was one of the more humane that night. Others would die slower, more painful mutilations from a hundred blades. Mustafa, the commander of this camp, a man who had killed dozens of men with his own hand and hundreds more by sending out "martyrs" with bombs strapped to their chests, was the last to die. A dozen of his guards would die first before his quarters were breached. He patiently awaited his enemy clutching a Makarov 9mm. When the American soldier leapt into his room, Mustafa put five shots into his torso. None missed. He heard them, the wet thud of bullets impacting flesh, one after the other. His attacker was not wearing body armor yet he kept coming. The bullets had penetrated both lungs, and blood was pouring into and out of his chest. But even in the throes of death, McGraw's soldier had more strength than the average man. "They have the strength of ten men," McGraw had been told more than once and he was often surprised to discover what feats their endurance and strength could accomplish.

"What kind of enemy is this," Mustafa thought in the moments before the blades sliced through him. His larynx was cut first so he couldn't scream out the last words he thought, "Allah, the children of Jews!"

McGraw heard only a little wailing, the brief rattle of gunfire, and then came the quiet. He eyed his watch again. The last few seconds of his timetable were clicking away. His heart filled, heavy like it was about to explode, and he bowed his head as if ready for the axe to fall. And then, after 480 seconds – eight minutes exactly – they all returned. Just as in practice, their timing was impeccable.

Like all American soldiers, they were trained to return with their dead and wounded. No man, no one left behind. There was but one casualty. They laid the body at McGraw's feet and eyed him. Their gaze was difficult to interpret. Did they want praise or consolation? It was not the time for either. McGraw simply pointed and his troops clambered aboard their truck as they had been trained to do. His job now was to withdraw quickly and quietly. Stealth was essential to his mission.

Of all the primates, the human being is the only one that cries. In fact, only one other land animal cries -- the elephant. On this field of battle, there were no elephants around to grieve and the only tear shed was Link McGraw's.