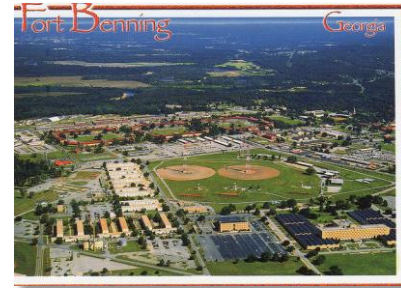


# CHAPTER 1

## The Beginning - United States Army Airborne Infantry - ARNGUS

On 11 March 1997 Neil boarded a bus for Ft. Benning, GA the Home of the Infantry. Basic Combat Training and Advanced Infantry Training took place back-to-back over 15 weeks. They had the same bristly Drill Sergeants who dusted them off morning, day and night. Alpha Company 2/58 Infantry was coined the "House of Pain" for good reason. Mental toughness, physical fitness and discipline were paramount. There was a former football lineman in his platoon who lost almost 70 lbs. At graduation he walked right past his wife and she didn't even notice him.



Neil finished the top recruit in his company true to his values and extraordinary level of commitment - not the last time that would happen. It was quite an honor.



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After Basic and Advanced Infantry Training, he moved to the other side of Ft. Benning to report for Basic Airborne training. In three short weeks he was jumping from perfectly good airplanes day and night.



With 'silver wings upon his chest' Neil reported to his first and only active-duty station, Ft. Bragg, NC the Home of the Airborne and Special Operations. His unit was the 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment. The 511th was a WWII Regiment that was re-activated in 1997 to test a non-line of sight anti-tank infantry weapon system. They were also attached to the 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division.





Ft. Bragg was the pride of the Army. Everywhere you looked there were fit, sharp-looking Soldiers with Maroon and Green Berets. Neil was proud just to be there serving with such fine men. Every morning 0530 brought physical training or 'PT', rain or shine. Hundreds of men filled the streets running in cadence and carrying their guidons high. Their cadence echoed through the streets like thunder. They were the tip of the spear, America's contingency force who could be anywhere in the world to fight in 18 hours.

While Neil was well prepared, he was never deployed while at Bragg. Military life was different in the pre-9-11 world. It was very much a garrison Army but standards were still very high. Their budgets were lower and military school opportunities were harder to come by.



**Air Assault Training** - Six months or so after Neil arrived at Ft. Bragg he volunteered for Air Assault training. The course was only 11 days but they called it the "Toughest 11 days in the Army". The purpose of the school is to train students in air assault operations, sling-load operations and rappelling.

Upon graduation of the course, each graduate would be able to perform skills required to make maximum use of helicopter assets in training and in combat to support their unit operations.

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**Day Zero** - Before being able to attend the course as a student, potential candidates would have to successfully complete Day Zero, notoriously known as the most physically demanding day before the actual school and for causing the majority of students to drop out.

Day Zero consists of physical training, distance running in Army Combat Uniforms, an air assault obstacle course, and a six-mile foot march followed by a strict inspection. Day Zero shows if the candidates are not only physically and mentally ready, but if the Soldier's heart is in the course. That had never been an issue for Neil.



Candidates that survive Day Zero begin the three phases of the course.

In phase one, three-day combat assault training, candidates were taught air assault operations, aircraft orientation, aircraft safety, aero medical evacuation, pathfinder operations, hand-and-arm signals and close-combat operations. They were given a written and “hands-on” exam in order to move on to the next phase.

By the end of phase one, 20% students had dropped out.

In phase two, students were introduced into sling load operations, which involved hands-on training on preparation, inspection and rigging. During this second three-day phase of Air Assault, candidates learned how to rig equipment onto rotary aircraft with a sling, an operation that generally requires the loading Soldier to hook a tether to the underbelly of a helicopter hovering just a few feet above the ground. Typical loads can range anywhere from 1,000 to 8,000 pounds. This operation is extremely precise, and requires intense preparation and concentration from all Air Assault team members. Trainees must use their skills to sling-load a trailer onto a hovering helicopter in under two minutes and pass a written and hands-on tests before moving to the next phase.

Statistically, phase two results in the biggest drop out of the course. Discipline and a tremendous amount of attention to detail are required and emphasized during training. Assault teams cannot afford mistakes or a lack of concentration.

By the end of phase two, only 60% of the students continued on.

In phase three, rappelling phase, students were taught the tying of the hip-rappel seat (Swiss seat), hook-up techniques, lock-in procedures, belay procedures and fast rope familiarization. Students then practiced rappelling from the wall side and open side of a 34-foot tower with and without combat equipment. Eventually students were required to use their new technical skills to do two fully equipped repels from a 34-foot tower and two repels from a UH-60 Blackhawk, hovering at 70-90 feet.

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As Neil recalled, “jumping from a plane was one thing but rappelling from a helicopter is another; both are harrowing in their own right.”



**Graduation Day** – It’s not over yet! Soldiers must complete a 12-mile foot march in full gear plus a rucksack in less than three hours. For their efforts graduates are awarded the Air Assault Badge and the 2B ASI (Additional Skill Identifier).



The total attrition rate in the Air Assault Training course was high, about 50 percent. It was every bit as academic as it was physical with attention to detail being a critical factor. One of the graduates who would not quit expressed the attitude of the survivors best, “Pain and frustration are temporary ... it may last a minute, hour, day, a year, but failure is forever.”

Graduation for Neil was another proud moment given half of the volunteers dropped out.



**Special Forces Assessment & Selection** - For Neil Air Assault Training was just the beginning. In the spring/summer of 1998 he decided to put himself to the ultimate test ... Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS) or simply 'Selection' as it was called. It was a grueling three-week test of every Soldier's strength and stamina. Organized torture is a good descriptor. To prepare he took on ten weeks of intense training on top of his daily physical training regimen. Neil was running and doing calisthenics in the morning, lifting weights at midday, and ruck marching in the evenings. His rucksack varied in weight from 35 lbs to 80 pounds and his distances varied from 4 miles to 20 miles. He was in the best shape of his life and most importantly his feet were hard and calloused and could endure anything.

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Everywhere a trainee went in SFAS they carried 70 lbs. They were assessed on their individual soldiering skills and how well they conducted themselves as a member of a team, under stress and with minimal sleep.



Team week in particular was brutal. This is his recollection of the training schedule for one day that he remembers:

0400 Wake up

0415 Formation

0420 4 mile forced march\*

0530 Chow

0540 6 mile Jeep push (no air in two of the tires) over rough terrain\*

1200 Chow

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1230 6 mile downed pilot litter carry over rough terrain (downed pilots were represented by 2 full-sized duffel bags filled with sand and rocks. Estimated weight of each = 250 lbs)\*

1600 2 mile forced march\*

1700 Chow

1800 Area beautification detail (yard work)

2000 - 2400 Psychological testing



*\*all events took place while carrying 70lbs of personal gear. Forced marches were conducted at a 12-minute mile pace. If at any time you fell back further than one arm's length from the soldier in front of you a negative spot report was issued. If you received three negative spot reports you were pulled from the course and sent back to your unit.*

The course was unrelenting and the attrition rate was again very high. For the duration of the course he estimated they covered 200 miles on their feet while carrying heavy weight. Neil personally lost 22 lbs in 21 days and conducted the final event, a 23 mile battle march, with a stress fracture in his right foot. 356 soldiers started the course, 127 finished – a staggering attrition of 65%. Of those who finished The Special Forces Cadre selected 78 who they felt earned the right to move on with Special Forces Training – just 20% of those who started. Neil was a selectee; another very proud moment – once again reflecting on his intense level of commitment.

Selection outcomes:

Those who quit are Voluntarily Withdrawn (VW) by the course cadre are generally designated NTR or Not-to-Return. This generally ends any opportunity a candidate may have to become a Special Forces soldier. Active-Duty military candidates will be returned to their previous units.

Candidates who are "medically dropped," and who are not then medically discharged from the military due to serious injury, are often permitted to "recycle," and to attempt the course again as soon as they are physically able to do so.

Candidates who successfully complete the course but who are "Boarded" and not selected ("Non-Select") are generally given the opportunity to attend selection again in 12 or 24 months.

Upon selection at SFAS, all Active Duty enlisted candidates will be briefed on:

The five Special Forces Active-Duty Groups

The four Special Forces Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) initially open to them

The languages spoken in each Special Forces Group

Candidates will then complete what is often referred to as a "wish list." Enlisted candidates rank the available MOS (18B, 18C, 18D, 18E) in order of preference. Both enlisted and officer candidates will list in order of preference the SF Groups in which they prefer to serve (1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, 10th) and the languages



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in which they prefer to be trained. Language selection is dependent on the Defense Language Aptitude Battery (DLAB) test scores of the candidate, as well as the SF Group to which they are assigned. Different SF Groups focus on different areas of responsibility (AOR), which require different languages. A board assigns each enlisted and officer candidate his MOS, Group placement, and language. The MOS, Group, that a selected candidate is assigned is not guaranteed, and is contingent upon the needs of the Special Forces community. Generally 80% of selected candidates are awarded their primary choices.

Successful Active-Duty candidates usually return to their previous units to await a slot in the Special Forces Qualification Course.

**Leaving the Military** - Because of Neil's healthcare training and background, he was selected to fill an 18D role on a Special Forces team. 18Ds are medics. In 1998, there was a delay in getting school dates for the 18D selectees and almost a year went by. Neil was now facing the end of his three-year original obligation.

He had accomplished much in the previous three years. His student loan was paid off and he was an E-4 in the Army with Special Forces eligibility. If he elected to renew his contract for the requisite 6 years to train and serve in Special Forces, he would have promoted quickly to E-6 upon completion of the Special Forces Qualification Course. However, he was 30 years old and being a Staff Sergeant at 30 just didn't seem to be the right fit. Honored and proud of his accomplishments, Neil elected to leave the Army and get back into the civilian world. It was 11 March 2000.

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