

Afghanistan, Wednesday, 24 August 2011

It's five o'clock in the morning. In our order of march, we're ushered towards an old gate at the front of the compound. Wearing the most up-to-date equipment and clutching our advanced weaponry, we brace ourselves for another long and intense patrol.

We are Seven Troop, Lima Company. I'm third man from the front; there's a dog handler, his furry companion and then Jordan in front of me. Our commander, Vicey, is behind, followed by Darlo, Gav, Spence, the remainder of the twelve-man patrol and Vicky, our medic. All of the patrol – my colleagues and friends – are willing to lay down their lives for each other at the drop of a hat.

The tour so far has been bloody and 'kinetic', a term marines use to describe intense action in battle. Yesterday, six of our men were injured in the first two hours after reaching the target location. And the rest of the day was spent fighting ferociously. Our closest friends are being killed and maimed by a relentless, invisible enemy and it's starting to take its toll on everyone.

This morning, minutes pass by like seconds. The air is thick with silence broken only occasionally by birds chirping above. If Afghanistan hadn't become a country of war and terror, it would be a nice place to visit sometime, I think to myself. As it was many years ago, when the Beatles made it popular in the UK. But today, under copious amounts of body armour, I'm sweating profusely in the rapidly rising heat.

The knotting within my stomach intensifies.

This routine is normal for us: waking early, eating rations for breakfast and readying ourselves for another patrol. Always hoping for the best, yet expecting the worst. But something is different today.

The marines seem quieter than usual, perhaps unnerved by the events of yesterday. Their silence amplifies the tension in the air.

I feel something bad is looming.

Our watching sentries on the roof give us the thumbs up. The immediate area is safe. The rusty old gate needs wrenching open, resisting our departure, as if trying to tell us to stay in the compound. We step out across a path. We're out on patrol.

Straightaway, there's an obstacle. An irrigation ditch. In Afghanistan, irrigation ditches can be high-banked, two to three metres deep, full of water and mud. It often takes one or two guys to help someone cross. Twelve men and our female medic have to take it in turns to struggle in and out. Slowing the patrol right down, making us vulnerable.

On this tour, already many marines from the company and our unit, 42 Commando, have been blown up and lost limbs from stepping into such ditches. Placing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the ground, at a point where we are struggling and at our slowest, is a preferred tactic of our hidden enemy. So we always have a point man at the front, responsible for clearing a path for us everywhere we go. Checking for IEDs and booby traps.

Today, no issues so far. The point man, Jordan, turns around and gives the nod. The rest of the patrol starts slowly across. We help each other pull our heavily laden selves out of the ditch. We cross successfully without problem. The only cost is time. Once the last man is ready, we move off.

Our target location is a compound in the village nearby – ten to twelve houses no more than 350 metres from the compound we occupied yesterday. Its rooftops are visible from ours.

Our aim is to tell the locals of our intentions in the area. To inform them that we're here to help and protect them. However, this village is situated in an area of continuous Taliban activity. Convincing the villagers of their safety is going to be tough.

During the lull in yesterday's battle, another patrol entered the village to sweep through, check it for traces of enemy activity and begin reassuring the villagers. They encountered little

response from the locals and no sign of the enemy. Maybe we'll have more luck.

Leaving the irrigation ditch behind us, we enter a cornfield at the height of its crop. Our vision is limited to a metre, if that. The heat is sweltering. Moisture from the vegetation adds a humid burden. We long to stop, take a knee, look at the ground and just breathe. We can't. We must stay switched on and vigilant, ready for the enemy's next move.

Any firefight in this environment will be close proximity, just metres apart and deadly.

Moving through is extremely hard work. Every corn stalk catches and snags on our kit. But we press on. This field has to end soon.

Exiting the field is going to bring us out onto a dusty dirt track, no more than fifty metres from the entrance to the village. Low walls are on both sides, enclosing more cornfields. Leading up towards the village, the track is crossed by another right next to the compound we need to enter.

Jordan halts and takes a knee. He's assessing the dangers of moving onto the track. The rest of the patrol waits in the intense humidity of the cornfield.

Jordan is a twenty-year-old marine now charged with the safety of us all. As point man, he's empowered by our commander to judge the atmospherics and make decisions of huge responsibility. All to ensure we're not wandering into an ambush or any other surprise the Taliban want to hit us with.

This type of assessment is the norm. Allowing Commander Paul 'Vicey' Vice, our extremely experienced and formidable leader, to use his senses and gauge the atmosphere of the area with Jordan.

Right now, however, something feels different. The atmosphere is strange and the hairs on our necks are bristling. Yet, nothing's happening, there's nobody around.

Knowing the dangers, Vacey decides to continue the patrol and start moving up the track. We have a professional job to do. We're here as elite Royal Marines Commandos, unperturbed by the enemy's ruthless tactics. Following commanders like Vacey, who make critical battle-winning decisions time and time again, we trust their every command, no matter the danger.

We move a few metres along the track. A tractor passes through the junction we're approaching. The driver sees us and floors it – as best as you can accelerate a tractor away from a group of heavily armed marines.

Jordan and I are now no further than twenty metres from the junction. As we near it, two men appear, dressed in black clothing and trainers – a typical Taliban outfit. We're as surprised to see them as they are to see us. Startled, we lock eyes before they run off into the field to our right.

We're not sent to Afghanistan to shoot and kill unarmed people. Even though we know they're more than likely Taliban, there's nothing we can do. But alarm bells are ringing. Something is imminent and we must react.

'Quick get up to the compound, now!' Vacey commands, urging us to move on.

I take a few steps, then the earth explodes around us with an almighty bang. The huge explosion rips through me, showering me in dirt and dust, shrapnel, mud and rocks. An immediate blistering heat burns my skin. I'm hit extremely hard in the head by something that my helmet deflects. My left calf is instantly a source of pain. A lot of pain.

This happens in a second: the noise, the burning, the pain. It's so quick that I'm left standing, almost unmoved, shocked by the impact and surprise of what has just happened. But not for long. In one more second I drop to the ground, gripping my calf to squeeze off the pain that isn't subsiding.

I am completely unable to assess anyone else or my own

injuries. My vision is orange from the dust, dirt and smoke that hang in the air, blinding me like a storm on Mars. I can hear nothing but muffled noises and the high-pitched ringing, as my senses try to comprehend what has just happened. My head is concussed from the impact of the explosion.

The first faculty to return is smell: cordite, explosives and subtle hints of burning flesh, a concoction of scents I will never forget.

Waking up to the reality of the scene, I remember I'm not the only one here. *What about the lads?* I think, a worry that briefly numbs the pain in my leg. I find myself aimlessly crawling around, desperately searching for my mates, trying to listen out to anything I can.

All I hear is muffled shouts and screams. Then, a gust of wind clears the smoke and dust and I see a sight that will stay etched on my mind for the rest of my life. Unconscious bodies lie all over the track. Clothes ripped, blood everywhere, weapons and equipment blown to pieces. Lifeless friends lying still on the ground upon which they just trod.

Within seconds, the remaining members of the patrol are sprinting towards us, risking everything to save the lives of those fighting death.

Lying only metres away from me is Vicey, unconscious. He's bleeding from an artery in his neck, which a piece of shrapnel has severed. My commander, our leader whom we all see as invincible, is lying in the middle of a dusty Afghan village, his life slipping away. He's the guy who has got us out of countless situations others would have failed in. We have become his ever dutiful and trusting followers. Only a few days ago, he won the Military Cross for his bravery in battle.

Trying to pull my injured leg back to life, I witness marine Richy Pencott sprint and kneel on Vicey's neck, controlling the bleed that's killing him. He's saving the life of our leader, but needs more help.

Richy switches his knee for his hands, struggling to reach for the clotting agent in his medical kit to pack into Vicky's wound and stop the bleeding.

I drag myself over to them both. Without speaking, I take my own clotting agent from my med kit and pass it to him. Richy and I switch roles. I place my fingers in Vicky's neck as Richy begins unwrapping the packaging before stuffing it into the wound. Vicky, our medic, races to us and takes over, pushing me aside so she can concentrate on saving our commander.

All I can do is lie there next to Vicky, wounded alongside my leader, gripping his hand and telling him to hold on for his family.

As all our casualties, including me, are being stretchered to the landing zone for evacuation, firing begins overhead. The roar of helicopters fills the air. An Apache Longbow attack helicopter is engaging Taliban insurgents, swooping in low, devastating the treeline near us with its 30mm cannon.

Throughout this, Richy, Vicky and the remainder of Seven Troop stay with the casualties and ensure we get to safety.

That day, 24 August 2011, changed my life for ever.

Working in unison with commanders and young men through an extremely difficult situation changed how I perceived leadership and strength of mind.

I'd experienced men and women acting way above their pay scales to ensure no further harm or death came to the rest of Seven Troop.

Colleagues like Richy put everything at risk to ensure the lives of Vicky, Darlo and everyone else were preserved, even if it meant risking his own.

Richy saved the life of our commander, not out of duty but out of faith. He did it both with courage and by using another amazing attribute: the Commando mindset.

COMMANDO TO COACH

Six years later, in 2017, I found myself standing in a small wood in Devon, proudly wearing my green beret, now a leader myself.

Overseeing a group of tired people fumbling around with military kit, I was discussing leadership, performance and how new cultures can be installed within teams. Tall and athletically built, my partner in the conversation folded his arms, then reached for his chin to stroke his stubble in a contemplative manner.

That group of fumbling people was the senior England men's football team. The man with me, stroking his stubble, was Gareth Southgate, the team's manager.

The group had joined us at the Commando training centre, Lympstone, for a weekend of assault courses, team building and some basic military training. For the players and staff, it was an opportunity to take part in activities a little different from what they were used to, something outside the norm. But, for Gareth, it was an opportunity to test character, build a culture and instil leadership – three fundamental attributes required in creating a successful team.

World Cup 2018 in Russia was just over a year away and England had yet to qualify. Gareth wanted to embed and nurture a culture within the team that few had seen before and take it into the World Cup finals and beyond.

Encouraging the players to develop a mindset of maturity and professionalism, Gareth was trying to expel the prima donna behaviour footballers are sometimes associated with. He was changing the way his players acted and were therefore perceived. He had a dramatic impact on the team, one that would lead to England's most successful World Cup in twenty-eight years while simultaneously bringing the nation behind them.

What a turn of events!

Standing in that wood deep in conversation, I had little idea that, after the tournament, I'd receive a call from Gareth's manager informing me that my company, Vanguard Global Solutions, was to be involved in a special event to be held by the Football Writers' Association in his honour.

If the invitation left me feeling bewildered and a little bit overwhelmed, that was nothing compared with the event itself. I was invited to the Savoy hotel in London, to join Gareth, along with a plethora of sporting legends. Not only that, but I was to personally deliver the FWA Tribute Award speech to the man himself!

Come the day in the cold January of 2019, my wife Natalie and I took our seats at the top table. As the remaining 400 guests applauded Gareth and our entry into the room, we were like two giddy children. Joining us at the table were key figures in football, most notably *Match of the Day* host Gary Lineker and his son George.

As the finest food was laid before us, the wine flowed – at least into my wife's glass. All a far cry from the dusty compounds and rations in Helmand Province. However, my wine glass stayed empty and my stomach tightly locked as I nervously sipped some fizzy water. Thoughts were racing around my head and I found myself checking my speech time and again. Not only to ensure it was in order, but also to make sure I was as prepared as possible – I didn't want to make myself look a complete fool in front of such an audience.

When it was time for the speeches, Gary Lineker took to the stage and addressed the room with a wonderfully powerful and insightful speech, celebrating Gareth's career to date. My nervousness was amplified even more when Gary told a joke about waistcoats, one that I had planned to use. 'Shit, shit, shit!' I repeated to my wife. 'Lineker's used my joke!'

My wife was as calm as ever, perhaps helped by the wine. Quietly speaking into my ear, she comforted me. 'Calm down, you've worked so hard, you deserve to be here. Just relax and be yourself.' Natalie was

right. It suddenly dawned on me how different my life – our lives – had become.

I had taken myself from being a broke, suicidal drug addict to someone who had just completed ten years' service as a Royal Marines Commando. Now, I was about to step on stage before a glittering audience and deliver a tribute speech for one of England's most successful football managers ever. Players and icons that I watched and admired as a child were about to listen to me speak about culture, leadership and mindset.

I had got myself to this position by hard work, determination, desire and, most importantly, belief. I had dared to dream, gained a focus and chased my goals with a ruthless tenacity until I achieved them.

Through this, I found reward and success. And I was still only thirty-one.

So, how did I do it?

I achieved all this by living and breathing a Commando mindset. A mindset I have later come to understand that I owned well before I ever set foot in the Royal Marines.

An unusual start to life

There's no denying that joining the marines changed my life. In fact, it actually saved my life.

Before I found my path in the marines, I spent my teenage years locked in a bitter and twisted cycle of isolation, depression and anger. Before I reached my teens, I witnessed my parents' very difficult separation. I moved home and school six times. I graded averagely at school and had zero qualifications. I was bullied. I became addicted to cocaine, steroids and several other drugs. I had no purpose or ambition and no plan for the future. I felt lost, not knowing what I would do next, and I felt trapped, locked in a maelstrom of low self-esteem and destructive behaviour. After leaving school at sixteen, I witnessed extreme violence while working as a nightclub bouncer, then I witnessed the death of a nightclubber right before my eyes. I was exposed to a lot of tough experiences few deal with at such a young age but I had also brought on a

lot of my problems all by myself. I was ashamed of who I had become. On several occasions, I questioned the point of living. At twenty, I felt worthless.

Twenty

So, what does a person think when they feel they have nothing left? End it! Take myself out of the equation and rid myself of the misery. When I look back, I realize that was a completely selfish attitude. Despite some of the bad, I had lots of good things going for me. A wonderful girlfriend, supportive family and some great friends. But, at the time, I just couldn't see it.

One day, back in early 2008, I decided to kill myself. I didn't know how, with what or where, but I knew that enough was enough. Then, later that week, I happened to see on YouTube a TV commercial for the Royal Marines from 2001. Fate works in mysterious ways.

In the advert, a young recruit is seen running through waist-deep bogs and crawling through muddy tunnels while fighting extreme exhaustion. His impressive appearance, equipment, rifle and sheer determination – all of it captivated me.

At one obstacle, the picture freezes with the words, *What's your limit?*

The young man progresses and fights on through a fully submerged tunnel, getting his leg caught along the way, trapping him beneath the surface.

Is it here?

When he frees himself, he exits the water, inhaling deeply, and then the image freezes again.

Here?

The picture holds slightly longer.

Yes? Don't even fill in the form.

Then, as an ORC (Offshore Raiding Craft) traverses the screen in the dark of night, the young man sports the famous green beret as he moves towards his target.

Freezing again, the well-known motto appears . . .

99.99% need not apply.

No music or dramatic speeches. Just the intense call to action.

When the advert finished, the words stayed etched in my mind. I wondered whether I might be one of the 0.01% they were looking for. As a boy, it had always been my desire to earn the green beret – to become a Commando. However, somewhere along the way, I had lost that vision. The dream had fizzled out and become nothing but a distant memory. I had gone from imagining being a Royal Marine as a young hopeful lad to wanting to kill myself as an unemployed drug addict.

That advert saved my life. Like a light bulb, something switched in my head the very moment the young Royal Marine left the screen. My attitude changed, as did my mindset from that moment onwards.

That year, I applied for the Royal Marines and completely turned my life around. I avoided taking the easy option of ending my life, saving my family the heartbreak and grieving I would have inevitably caused, and instead began fulfilling a once distant dream, working incredibly hard to transform my lot.

The marines changed me as a person. My military career showed me who I am and took me from despair to repair. In the marines, my life was stripped back to the basics and was then rebuilt afresh. At the end of my training I was equipped with the tools, knowledge and skills of one of the world's elite fighting forces.

Through my training, I discovered that, before I could ever attempt to lead anyone else, I would first need to effectively lead myself.

Understanding this helped me realize that I had owned a Commando mindset before I stepped foot in the military. To change myself from a drug addict contemplating suicide to someone in the right mental and physical shape to even apply for the Commandos, let alone be accepted for and complete the training, took immense courage and determination.

Just over a decade has passed since that day I considered taking my own life. Having served my country under the renowned green beret, my work as a business and performance coach now leads me around the

UK, sometimes around the world, meeting new people and helping them unlock their potential. Whether I am working with an organization or individuals like yourself, my sole purpose is to help you develop your skills and find success. And that is what *Commando Mindset* is about. This book draws heavily upon the lessons, ethos, values and spirit of my beloved Royal Marines. But it also draws on my personal experiences before I joined them and my work as a coach after I left.

So, why listen to me?

You may be wondering what makes my voice the one you should listen to in order to help you find your potential, achieve your goals and strive for something you feel is beyond your limits.

Yes, I've won medals, but plenty of other war veterans have won more. I haven't spent years at university studying performance, nor am I a psychologist who has dedicated his life to studying mindsets.

Instead, I am someone who has started right at the bottom, alone, with only a feeling of worthlessness to keep me company. But I turned it around and climbed to the top, achieving things far beyond what I ever thought possible – achievements that came to fruition only because I believed in myself and challenged myself.

Being a Royal Marines Commando put me alongside some of the most inspiring leaders and determined colleagues and friends. I was surrounded by highly motivated people who were always striving for excellence – which, as it turns out, is extremely infectious.

As a result, I gained a wealth of experience I now realize that anyone can use, both in or out of the military. Being a Commando made me a better family man, friend, business owner, consultant and coach. It allowed me access to a new world of possibility.

I want to share all that I learned so that you too can experience a journey like mine and fulfil your potential. I hope that *Commando Mindset* will reach people around the world. Whether you're daunted by impending exams, trying for a baby, creating a start-up, growing a business, applying for a new job, doing your first marathon, attempting Everest, moving industries, or gaining leadership responsibilities for

the first time – *Commando Mindset* will help you. In these pages you'll find valuable lessons to help you achieve success, no matter what challenges you face, no matter where you come from.

In life, we often feel as if we're being held back by something, whether that's by a specific situation we're in, by others or – most of the time – by ourselves. However, it's never too late to make a difference. You own the ability to change and succeed in anything you put your mind to.

My journey has made me realize that we *all* have a Commando mindset beneath our layers of self-doubt and fear. That winning attitude is in there somewhere, we just need to unleash it.

This book will be the catalyst for *your* journey to success.

By gaining a Commando mindset, you **WILL** succeed. You'll discover a wealth of purpose. You'll believe in yourself. You will endure hardship. You will struggle. And you will achieve your goals.

Now it's time to take a breath, a step back, as we look first at what it means to be a Commando and then what a Commando mindset comprises.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A COMMANDO

Commando (noun) A member of an elite light-infantry or special forces organization, often specializing in amphibious landings, parachuting and abseiling; a soldier trained to make raids and assaults; an operator of unconventional warfare.

The word 'Commando' was used by Afrikaner guerrillas during the Second Boer War, 1899–1902, the title assigned to combat units which played a specific role. By 1942, the word had become permanently established within Britain's military, as the British Commandos were born as part of the Royal Marines.

The Royal Marines are steeped in over 350 years of illustrious history, full of immeasurable acts of heroism, courage, leadership and sacrifice.

Owning invaluable skills, Commandos have seen action in every conflict since World War II, all the way through to Iraq and Afghanistan. They now stand tall as one of the world's most impressive and experienced elite fighting forces, capable of deploying anywhere on the planet at a moment's notice – from the Arctic Circle to searing deserts, dense jungles to teeming cities. The marines are not only ready and prepared but also willing.

Once a marine, always a marine

We Commandos own an ethos that drives us and provides us with a precise way of thinking:

- *Be the first to understand; the first to adapt and respond; and the first to overcome.*

As part of the Commando mindset, this way of thinking is fundamental in ensuring we are prepared for every mission, challenge and operation.

Our values are simple, but powerful:

- *Excellence*, strive to do better
- *Integrity*, tell the truth
- *Self-discipline*, resist the easy option
- *Humility*, respect the rights, diversity and values of others.

And our spirits are equally profound:

- *Courage*, get out front and do what is right
- *Determination*, never give up
- *Unselfishness*, friends first, team second, self last
- *Cheerfulness*, make humour the heart of morale.

These values have forged the Commandos' unique spirit and way of being: capable of immeasurable strength, courage and fortitude to complete any task.