

SOAR

A Black Ops Novel

John Weisman



William Morrow *An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers*

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*To the memory of
Colonel Charlie A. Beckwith, USA (Ret.), Soldier,
Man o' Warsman, and Patriot*

and

*To "Rowdy" and "Loner"
Warriors
who are still fighting to keep
Americans safe*

He who will not risk cannot win.

—Admiral John Paul Jones, 1791





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The First Forty Hours

SNAFU

***West of Yengisu, Xinjiang Autonomous Region, China.
1030 Hours Local Time.***

SAM PHILLIPS LOOKED BACK across the tussocky desert landscape toward the tan speck that was the antique Toyota land cruiser, making sure for the sixth time in just under two hours that it still sat concealed behind a ragged row of poplar trees, far enough off the sparsely traveled two-lane highway to render it invisible to any traffic. He raised a pair of lightweight field glasses that hung on a soft nylon strap around his neck and rotated the knurled center knob until the boxy 4×4's driver, whose name was Shoazim, came into focus. For a quarter of a minute or so, Sam spied on the bony Uighur.

He had rented Shoazim and his vehicle in Ürümqi, the autonomous region's capital city. Like all official guides, Shoazim reported at the very least to the local police, or even more likely, to some department of MSS, the Chinese Ministry of State Security. And so Sam had kept the man at arm's length. If there was something sensitive to discuss, he did it in private, or in French. Still, the guide had been helpful, negotiating their way

onto a number of sites Sam's three-man crew videoed for the travelogue he was ostensibly making.

Sam was pleased to see Shoazim leaning up against the rear side of the vehicle, omnipresent cigarette between his lips, his right knee cocked against a tire, his right hand twirling the end of his long, stringy mustache—all body language that indicated boredom. Though compact, the glasses were powerful enough so that Sam could watch Shoazim exhale a plume of smoke from one of the strong black tobacco cigarettes whose nasty stench permeated the Toyota, even though they always drove with all the windows open, even at night when the temperature dropped below freezing.

It was in the low sixties now. Despite the mild weather, Sam was sweating. Between the unrelentingly blue sky and the warm morning sun, both his shirt and the rucksack he carried were wet clear through, and the dampness had spread to the waistband of his cargo pants. They were all sweating, the four of them, struggling under the weight of the video gear, which was made all the heavier because of the nuclear sensors concealed within the camera's bulky tripod legs.

The sensors were state-of-the-art, developed by a joint Department of Energy–No Such Agency task force. There were three, and they had to be positioned in a gentle, precise curve at two-hundred-meter intervals to do the job for which they'd been designed. They'd been fabricated out of a space-age nonmagnetic titanium-scandium compound that was harder and lighter than steel and more durable than carbon fiber. They were self-powered, and could operate for years without recharging. And they were programmed to send their readings in secure, coded microbursts to a trio of National Reconnaissance Office SPARROW HAWK stealth satellites launched covertly during one of NASA's shuttle missions in 2000. The three invisible NRO birds sat in geosynchronous orbit twenty-two thousand miles above the earth. They were already receiving signals from other covert sensor pods, although Sam wasn't cleared high enough to know how many had been inserted, or where they might be located.

Sam dropped the glasses back onto his chest, crested the scrub grass of the dune, and made his way along the far side. The soft padded canvas case holding the video camera banged against his right side as he lurched precariously down a steep embankment of packed sand, rocks, and brushwood to catch up to the other three. At the bottom, he took a long hard

look at the next series of dunes, which were taller, rockier, and more heavily brambled than the ones they'd just crossed, listened to the protestations coming from his body, and held up his hand to call a momentary halt. "Time to check our position."

"What's wrong, Pops, you need another break?" The sensor tech, whose real name was Marty Kaszeta, even though his Irish passport identified him as Martin Charles Quinn, was a mere twenty-six. He flaunted his youth, Sam thought, quite unmercifully, including the maddening way he insisted on wearing his long-billed Tottenham Hotspurs cap backward. Kaz's right shoulder was wet under the tripod case strap. But he'd set the pace for the whole group, even though his load was almost thirty-five pounds heavier than anyone else's.

So Sam chose to ignore the dig. Instead, he untied the blue-and-white kerchief from around his neck, exhaled loudly, and wiped at his face with the salty wet cotton triangle. He'd always considered himself in pretty good physical shape. But five kliks of packed sand and scrub had just proved otherwise, hadn't it? God, he was bushed. He reached around and dug into his rucksack for one of the three half-liter bottles of water he carried, took a long, welcome pull of the warm liquid, and consoled himself with the fact that he was so wiped because he was the Team Elder. The official CIA geezer.

The communicator, Dick Campbell, a sheep-dipped Marine captain who'd been TDY'd¹ from Langley's paramilitary division (looking far too *Semper Fi*, which gave Sam some anxiety), had just turned thirty-one. Sam liked to tell him *he* couldn't remember being thirty-one. At least the lanky, team security officer—his name was Chris Wyman but he liked to be called X-Man—was approaching adulthood: Wyman was thirty-five—three years Sam's junior. He had the low-key approach to life you'd expect from a kid who'd grown up in Aspen, spending more time on the slopes than in the classroom. But Wyman was sharp, and thorough, and didn't miss much. He'd done time in enough hardship posts—a countersurveillance assignment against the Iranians in Baku and a black program against al-Qaeda in Pakistan among them—for Sam to know he was good at his job.

Of course, it didn't help Sam's mental state to see X-Man wasn't even breathing hard as he paused to scan the dunes for surveillance, then lifted

1. Military acronym for temporary duty.

his field glasses to make sure they weren't being tracked by a UAV.² He finally caught Wyman's eye, which was hard to do given the Oakleys. "I hate people like you, y'know."

The security officer's long, tanned face cracked a smile. "When we get home, I'll wangle you an AARP membership at my gym, Sam."

"When we get home," said Sam, double-checking to make sure the screw top was tight then dropping the water bottle back into the rucksack, "I'm hanging up my spurs. Gonna put in for a desk job. I'm getting way too old for this crap."

Kaz snorted derisively. "You, Pops? Never. You're a gumshoe. You just ain't the desk-jockey type."

The kid was correct. At thirty-eight, Sam had been a CIA case officer for just over thirteen years—and served overseas for all but twenty months of that time. He'd begun his career with sixteen months of Pashto language training followed by a two-year posting under consular cover in Islamabad. From there, he'd volunteered for an eight-month immersion course in Kazakh, after which he'd taken on a three-year assignment no other case officer wanted: running the one-man station in Almaty.

Later, there had been tours in Paris, where he'd worked as the Central Asia branch chief, followed by two and a half years in Dushanbe, the Tajik capital. There, he'd managed to pick up some Dari, as well as conversational Russian, bits of Uighur, and enough of what he called kitchen Mandarin to listen to Radio Beijing and understand about a quarter of it. He'd also recruited a productive network of Tajiks and a rare Russian—a lieutenant colonel assigned to the 201st Mechanized Infantry Division.

Sam Phillips had natural people skills and learned and retained languages the way others quickly absorb music or art. His low-key approach to life, wry sense of humor, and the instinctive ability to read nuance and adapt to culturally unfamiliar surroundings made him a shrewd, capable operative. Indeed, Sam preferred working alone in back alleys from Bishkek to Berlin regardless of the potential for risk. It was preferable to what he knew from experience to be a more hostile environment than any denied area overseas: the political minefield at the George Bush Center for Intelligence at Langley, Virginia.

2. Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. A pilotless drone surveillance aircraft.

Which is why it was absolutely true he'd never willingly leave the streets for a desk. Not that he'd ever be asked to. In fact, if you looked at the situation coldly, at the relatively young age of thirty-eight Sam Phillips was considered something of a dinosaur at the digitized, computerized, technodependent Central Intelligence Agency of the early twenty-first century. He was seen as a throwback, a foot soldier slogging willingly through the Wilderness of Mirrors. In the flexi-time culture of latte drinkers and retirement-portfolio builders, Sam was the odd man out: the sort of old-fashioned case officer who was professionally indifferent to creature comforts, identifiable food, and other niceties. Sam Phillips existed completely, entirely, totally, to spot, assess, and recruit spies. And if it required that his living conditions be less than no-star, and his backup nonexistent, well then, so be it. He'd get the job done anyway.

Sam's corridor file back at Langley pegged him negatively as a risk taker, a cowboy who too often pushed the edge of the operational envelope. Still, he had a reputation for success in the field. In Langley's op-resistant culture, which had persisted even after the 9/11 intelligence debacle, the loss of agents through carelessness, neglect, or simple inattention to detail all seemed to be grounds for promotion instead of termination. But Sam Phillips could say—and did, with considerable pride—that over his decade plus of street work, he'd never lost a single one of *his* agents.

That kind of rep carried some weight. If not with the present crop of technocrat panjandrums occupying the seventh-floor executive suites, at least with the small remaining cadre of streetwise geezers who, like Sam, believed that satellites capable of reading a license plate from two hundred miles up were the solution to intelligence gathering only if you were prone to being attacked by license plates. Uncovering your adversary's capabilities and intentions, Sam Phillips was unshakably convinced, required human-sourced intelligence. That meant putting your body on the line.

But Sam had also realized early in his career that risk taking did not mean the same as foolishness. A history and language major at Berkeley, he'd first read about Alexander Suvorov, the eighteenth-century Russian military tactician and philosopher, as a sophomore. Later, as a greenhorn case officer in his late twenties, he'd reread Suvorov, so as to better understand the intricacies of the Russian military mind.

Sam's reading may have begun as an intellectual exercise to help him in making recruitments. It ended, however, with his enthusiastic acceptance of Suvorov's strategic doctrine as the basis for his own intelligence-gathering operations. He took many of the field marshal's dictums ("Speed is essential; haste harmful" and "Train hard, fight easy" were two of his favorites) to heart, and consciously employed them in the field. And so, what his deskbound superiors often thought to be impetuous, seat-of-the-pants decisions were in point of fact meticulously designed, boldly executed operations that resulted in the obtaining of valuable intelligence for the United States.

Sam's capacity for audaciousness coupled with careful planning was a critical factor in his current role as team leader—at least so far as the three volunteers traveling with him were concerned. That was because SIE-1, which was Langley's bureaucratic acronym for the four-man Sino Insertion Element No. 1 Sam led, was composed of NOCs.³

That meant Sam and his team entered China using real but nonetheless bogus British, Irish, and Canadian passports issued under aliases. They'd posed as a four-man independent TV crew shooting an "Outward Bound Trekking along the Silk Road" video for a London-based travel company that wanted to expand its "extreme sports" tour packages. Yes, their travel documents had survived the scrutiny of Turkish, Azeri, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Chinese border guards and other officials. And yes, if anyone had called the accommodation addresses and telephone numbers in London, Dublin, or Toronto that were printed on their business cards, drivers' licenses, credit cards, and other miscellaneous wallet detritus and pocket litter, all of which had been provided by Langley's document wizards, the team's bona fides would have been authenticated beyond a doubt. But all of that didn't lessen the knowledge that in plain English, nonofficial cover meant they were working without a net.

Their objective, precisely expressed in National Security Directive 16226, which had been signed by the president of the United States nine weeks previously, was, quote: *"For officers of the Central Intelligence Agency and/or other officials of the United States government to covertly insert and position at a specific location inside the People's Republic of China a technical means*

3. Non-Official Cover intelligence officers.

for ensuring that all the conditions of the current-draft nuclear weapons agreement between the United States and the People's Republic of China will be met.”

The word *covertly* meant that for Sam Phillips and his team there was no diplomatic immunity. There was no Geneva convention. If they got caught, it was prison or summary execution. Full stop. End of story. Like the characters in the *Mission: Impossible* movies, the administration would deny any responsibility, etc., etc. Except what Sam and his crew were doing wasn't Hollywood. It was real—and the consequences could prove fatal.

The operation was also complicated by the fact that there were four of them. Typically, case officers are solitary workers, meeting their agents only after taking exhaustive steps to ensure they have not been compromised by the opposition. NOCs generally work singly. Not always: sometimes, a pair of Honeymooners—DO⁴ slang for husband-and-wife NOC teams—were assigned if the mission required it. A four-man covert infiltration crew was a rarity these days, especially a team like SIE-1, which had been assembled for this one critical mission. The fact that he, Kaz, X-Man, and Dick hadn't worked together before made Sam a little nervous.

But the four of them gelled remarkably well during the two weeks of mission prep they'd been allowed before assembling in London to pick up their equipment and commence their odyssey through Ankara, Baku, Bishkek, and points east. And Sam had watched with a critical eye as they made their way from Almaty, aggressively bargained themselves through the organized thievery that is Kazakh passport control, and crossed into the free trade zone just outside the ramshackle Chinese border post east of Khorgos. For kids who hadn't had his years of training or street experience, the trio had handled themselves like real pros.

They had been diligent about their tradecraft. China is what is known in the intelligence business as a denied area. For SIE-1 it meant that even in Western China, two time zones from Beijing,⁵ the *Guojia Anquan Bu*, or Ministry of State Security, still maintained aggressive technical sur-

4. Directorate of Operations, the CIA's clandestine spy service.

5. All China runs officially on Beijing time. But most of the provinces operate on their own local schedules, which reflect their geographic position vis-à-vis Universal (Greenwich Mean) Time. Xinjiang's "unofficial" clocks run two hours behind Beijing's.