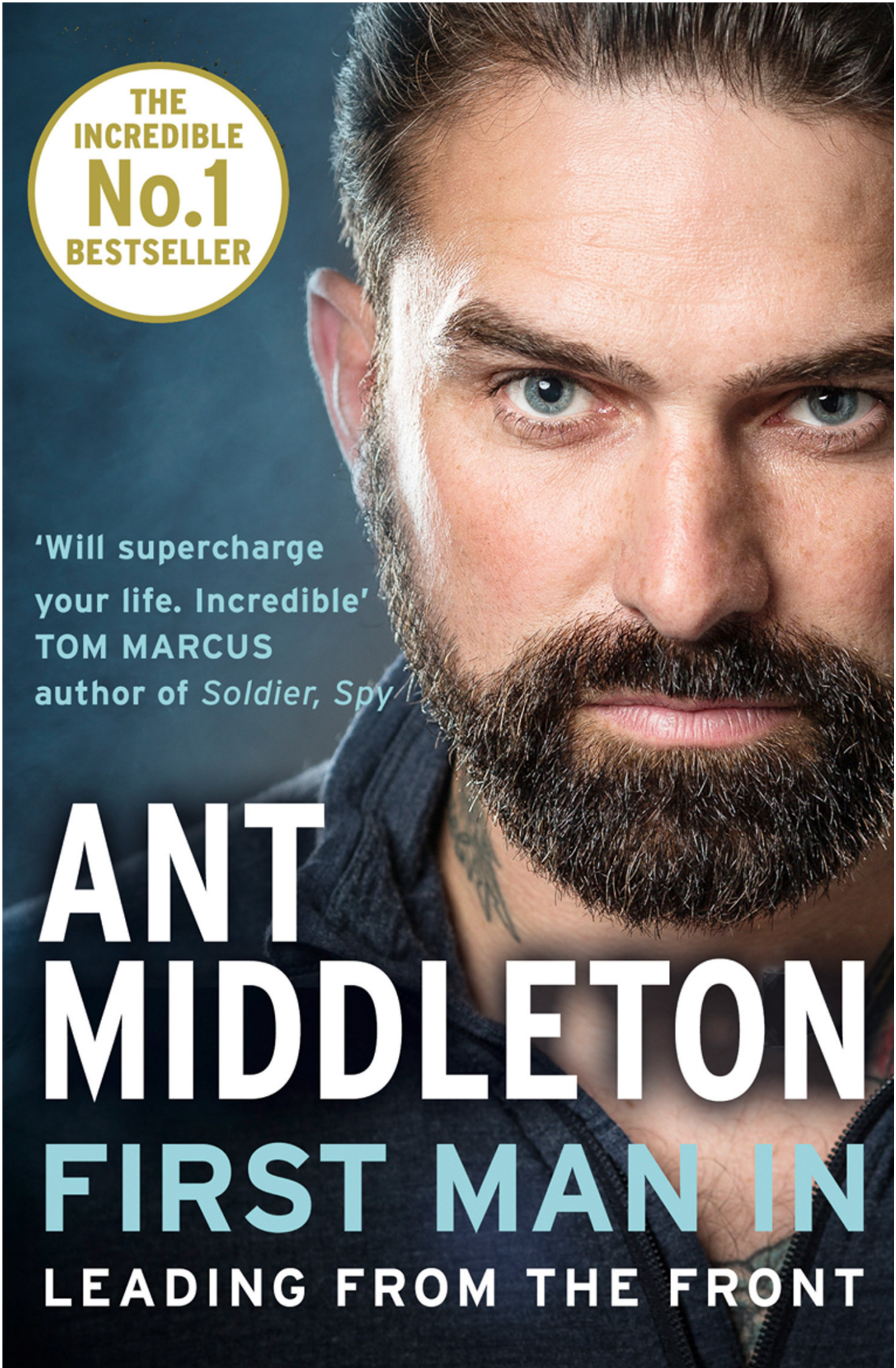
THE INCREDIBLE No.1 BESTSELLER
'Will supercharge your life. Incredible'
TOM MARCUS
author of *Soldier, Spy*
ANT MIDDLETON
FIRST MAN IN
LEADING FROM THE FRONT

Ant Middleton

First Man In

«HarperCollins»

Middleton A.

First Man In / A. Middleton — «HarperCollins»,

NUMBER 1 SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLERNo one is born a leader. But through sheer determination and by confronting life's challenges, Ant Middleton has come to know the meaning of true leadership. In First Man In, he shares the core lessons he's learned over the course of his fascinating, exhilarating life.Special forces training is no walk in the park. The rules are strict and they make sure you learn the hard way, pushing you beyond the limits of what is physically possible. There is no mercy. Even when you are bleeding and broken, to admit defeat is failure.To survive the gruelling selection process to become a member of the elite you need toughness, aggression, meticulous attention to detail and unrelenting self-discipline, all traits that make for the best leaders.After 13 years service in the military, with 4 years as a Special Boat Service (SBS) sniper, Ant Middleton is the epitome of what it takes to excel. He served in the SBS, the naval wing of the special forces, the Royal Marines and 9 Parachute Squadron Royal, achieving what is known as the 'Holy Trinity' of the UK's Elite Forces. As a point man in the SBS, Ant was always the first man through the door, the first man into the dark, and the first man in harm's way.In this fascinating, exhilarating and revealing book, Ant speaks about the highs and gut-wrenching lows of his life – from the thrill of passing Special Forces Selection to dealing with the early death of his father and ending up in prison on leaving the military – and draws valuable lessons that we can all use in our daily lives.

Содержание


A
MIDD
FIRST

COPYRIGHT

HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
www.harpercollins.co.uk
First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2018
FIRST EDITION

Cover design by Claire Ward © HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2019
Cover photograph © Andrew Brown
A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

Find out about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green
Source ISBN: 9780008245719
Ebook Edition © May 2018 ISBN: 9780008245740
Version: 2019-04-30

DEDICATION

For Emilie

To the only person who can make me or break me with one sentence. This woman pushes me on a daily basis and will not accept anything less than one hundred per cent from me at all times. When I lose my way, she redirects me. When I put a foot out of place, she stamps on it. And when I fail, she is the only person who can lift me back up and make me feel invincible. My wife is the reason I am here today and she is the lady that has made me the man I am.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Of all the people that I meet in my day-to-day life, most don't have the courage to ask The Question. The majority only know me from the television and so are aware that I served two tours of Afghanistan with the Special Forces. Because my first TV appearance was on Channel 4's *SAS: Who Dares Wins*, it's often assumed that I was a member of the Special Air Service. In fact, I was a Special Boat Service operator. In military parlance I was a point man. My job was to lead a small group of men into Taliban compounds, searching out high-status targets on dangerous 'hard arrest' missions. Because of the great secrecy that surrounds Special Forces operations, I can't talk about them. But I am able to give you a very general answer to The Question.

Killing someone feels like gently pulling your trigger finger back a few millimetres. It feels like hearing a dull pop. It feels like seeing a man-shaped object fall away from your sights. It feels like getting the job done. It feels satisfying. But, beyond that, killing someone feels like nothing at all. You might find that shocking. You might even find it offensive. I'm aware, of course, that mine is not an ordinary response. It's not even a response that I share with everyone who's fought in war. Many brave men I served alongside will remain forever traumatised by the horrors they've witnessed and taken part in. I truly feel for them. Being part of a 'hard arrest' team meant working regularly in conditions of life-threatening stress and being surrounded, almost every day, by blood and killing. But my struggle wasn't with the trauma all that created. Mine was with its satisfaction. I'd enjoyed it – perhaps, at times, too much. I thrived on combat. I still miss it every day.

In Afghanistan, getting shot at was a regular occurrence. You came to expect it. I viewed survival as a numbers game. As point man, every time I entered a Taliban compound or a room within a compound and knew that there was badness on the other side, I played the odds in my head. It was a bit like roulette – a calculated risk. I'd think, 'What are the chances of me going through that door and there's a combatant there who knows I'm coming? If they do know I'm coming, what are the chances of them being able to fire more than one bullet before I shoot at them? What are the chances that one bullet's going to hit me in the head and kill me?' When I thought of it like that, I'd usually come to realise the chances were pretty slim. So I'd think, 'Fuck it, the odds are with me,' and that would get me through the door.

Sometimes, at this point of entry, there'd be bullets flying in my direction. But experience told me these bursts were usually over in seconds and that the moment there was a pause in firing I could make my move – entering crouched low, because idiots with AKs usually can't control the natural lift of their weapons and they spray rounds at the ceiling when they fire. I'd think, 'If he pulls the trigger again, he'll only have the chance to squeeze it once or twice, max, before I get the drop on him.' If one or two rounds did come out of his weapon and strike me in the chest plate, it would only be my chest plate. If they hit me in the leg, they'd only immobilise me for a split second. If I fell down, I knew my pal would be right behind me, on my shoulder, and would finish the job in a blink. That was how I saw it – a numbers game. Always the odds. Always a little calculation in my head.

Which is not to say I found it easy. Far from it. Going into an operation, the fear would be horrendous. But as soon as it all began – the moment I breached the compound or made contact with the enemy – I'd enter a completely different psychological space. The only thing I can compare it to is the final seconds before a car smash, when you see how it's all going to play out in slow motion. Your brain goes into a hyper-efficient state, absorbing so much information from your surroundings that it really does feel as if the clock has suddenly slowed down – as if you've got the ability to control time itself.

This enabled me to act with a level of precision in which it seemed I could count in milliseconds. It was a state of pure focus, pure action, pure instinct, every cell in my body working in perfect harmony with each other towards the same end, at a level of peak performance. I didn't feel any

emotion. There was only awareness, control and action. It was the closest thing I could imagine to feeling all-powerful, like God. And that's what I was, in a way. When I was point man in the middle of a dangerous operation, godlike was how my mind and body felt – and godlike was how I had to act in judging, in a fraction of an instant, who lived and who died.

The first man I ever killed came out at me from the hot, dusty shadows of an Afghan compound. It was night. He was wearing a traditional white ankle-length robe, called a dish-dash. There was a thick strap over his right shoulder. In his hands, an AK-47. He stopped, then squinted into the darkness. He couldn't see me. He stared some more. His neck craned forwards. He saw the two green eyes of my night-vision goggles staring back at him from the blackness. And then it came, an event I'd soon know well. While a lot goes on within it, the moment of death always has an order, a sure sequence of events. It happens like this: Shock. Doubt. Disbelief. Confusion. Your target feels an urge to double-check a situation that they can't quite believe is happening. Their thoughts race. Their lips open just a few millimetres. Their eyes squint into the night. Their chin moves forward. Their body begins to change its stance. And then …

That moment – the one I'd watch happening time after time after time in Afghanistan in intimate, ultra-slow motion – is our secret weapon. Staying alive, and achieving our objective, relied on tiny fractions of time such as this. Special Forces soldiers are trained to operate between the tremors of the clock's ticking hand, slipping in and out and doing their work in the time it takes for the enemy to turn one thought into another. And that's how it went the night of my first kill. From my position in the corner of the compound I took half a step forwards, raised my weapon and squeezed the trigger once, then twice. The suppressor I'd screwed to the barrel made the firing of the bullets sound like little more than the clicks of a computer mouse. Perfect shots. Two in the mouth. He went down.

The Special Forces are looking for individuals who have the ability to do this as a job, day in, day out, and not let it destroy them. That was me. People like this aren't born this way. They're made. This book is not just lessons in leadership that I've learned over the years. It's the story of how I became the man I am. It's a tale of a naive and gentle young lad whose first memory is of his beloved father being found dead. It's the tale of struggle and pain and fury in the army, of darkness and violence on the streets of Essex, of days in war zones, days in prison, days hunting down kidnapped girls in foreign lands, days leading men out of impossible hells. It's the story of how I became the kind of individual who leads from the front and who, no matter what danger he's charging into, always wants to be first man in.

PREFACE

Strange noises. People moving about. People talking. Footsteps. Heavy, grown-up footsteps that I didn't recognise. I sat up in bed and tried to wake myself by squeezing and rubbing my eyes with the backs of my hands. It was the week after Christmas – perhaps Mum and Dad were having a party. I climbed down from my top bunk past my brother's bed, which was empty. On the chest of drawers there was my favourite toy, a plastic army helicopter that Dad had bought for my fifth birthday. I reached up on tiptoes and gave its black propellers a push. I was about to take it down when I heard someone crying. I turned towards the sound. Through the crack in the door I saw a policeman.

I slipped out and followed him, barefoot in my grey pyjamas, in the direction of my parents' bedroom. I passed two more policemen in the corridor who were talking and didn't seem to notice me. Lights were blazing in my mum and dad's room. There were even more policemen in there, four, maybe five of them, crowded around the bed. Intrigued and excited, I pushed between the legs of two of them and peered up to see what they were all looking at. There was someone under the sheets. Whoever it was, they weren't moving. I shuffled forward for a better view.

'No! No! No!' a policeman shouted. He bent down and manoeuvred me back down the corridor into the other bedroom, his bony fingertips pressing into my shoulders. My brothers were all in there, Peter, Michael and Daniel. Someone had taken the television up there from downstairs. They were all watching it. I sat down in the corner. I didn't say a word.

My next memory is about four weeks later. I was being woken up again: 'Anthony! Anthony! Come on, Anthony. Wake up.' The main light was on. There were two people standing over me, my mum and this man I'd never seen before. He was enormously tall, with a big nose and long, dark hair that went down past his shoulders. I didn't know how old he was, but I could see he was much younger than Mum.

'Anthony,' she said. 'Meet your new dad.'

LESSON 1

DON'T LET ANYONE DEFINE WHO YOU ARE

It felt as if we'd been driving for days. I gazed out of the car window, watching motorways turn to A-roads turn to winding, hedge-crowded country lanes, with every mile we travelled bringing me closer and closer to the new life I'd chosen for myself and further away from the familiarity of the family home and everything I loved, hated and feared. The clouds hung above us like oily rags and the November wind battered on the roof of our Ford Sierra as it sputtered through the Surrey countryside. Neither me, my mum nor my stepfather spoke much. We let the English weather do the talking for us. As the wheels of the car pounded the tarmac, anxious thoughts span around my head. Had I made the right decision? Would I find myself and thrive in my new home? Or was I just swapping one unpredictable hellhole for another? Who was I going to be when this new journey ended? If I'd known the answer to that, I'd have opened the car door and jumped straight out.

The truth was, back in 1997 I didn't have much of an idea who I was as a person. Who does when they're seventeen? At that age we like to think we're fully defined human beings, but the fact is we're barely out of life's starting blocks. We've spent our childhood being defined by teachers, parents, brothers, sisters, tinpot celebrities on the TV and, in the middle of all that, is a squishy lump of dough who's constantly being shaped and reshaped. That's why, especially when we're young, it's crucial that we're surrounded by people whose influence is going to be positive and who are interested in building up our strengths, rather than drowning us in our weaknesses. I know that now. I wish I'd known it then.

Eventually, on the side of a narrow road, a red sign came into view. I couldn't read what it said through the steam and raindrops on my window, so I rubbed the condensation away with the sleeve of my sweatshirt. MILITARY ROAD: ALL VEHICLES ARE LIABLE TO BE STOPPED. I sat up and took a deep breath. The car slowed down. There was another sign, a white notice that just said PIRBRIGHT CAMP. Beyond that was a guard room outside tall, black gates. And then, the sign I had been looking for: NEW RECRUITS REPORT HERE. 'Here we go, Mum,' I said, trying to disguise the nervousness in my voice. 'This is it.'

She pulled up in a lay-by. I got out, lifted my heavy black bag from the boot and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. If she was sad to see me go, she did a good job of hiding it. My stepfather wound his window down, gave me the thumbs-up and said, 'Good luck. See you later,' then looked away. Before I had the chance to think, Mum was back in the car, closing her door and turning her key in the ignition. The engine fired up and I watched them vanish into the grey-green scenery. I took a moment to steady myself. This was it. From now on, everything was going to be different.

I took a deep breath, picked up my bag, slung it over my shoulder and turned towards the domineering complex of red-brick buildings. It looked like a prison or maybe a large hospital. There were rolls of barbed wire on the tops of the walls and security cameras on tall poles facing this way and that. I couldn't see anyone else or hear any voices. I felt completely alone. It was almost creepy.

I approached the guard room nervously, almost expecting there to be nobody behind the glass window. When I was two steps away it was pulled open with a crack and a skinny guy in his mid-twenties, wearing military greens and those round John Lennon-style glasses, peered out. I flashed him my best friendly, charming and disarming smile. 'I'm reporting for Basic Training, sir,' I told him.

The soldier gave me a look like a bird had crapped on his spectacles.

'Sir? Don't call me Sir. I work for a living. It's "Corporal" to you. Name?'

'Middleton, Corporal,' I said. 'Royal Engineers.'

He picked up a clipboard that had been lying on his desk and scanned it lazily. 'Middleton … Middleton … Middleton …'

I shifted my bag onto my other shoulder and tried to squeeze some blood back into my hand. He turned the sheet over and carried on running his fingertip down it. Then, very slowly, he reached

over, picked up a second clipboard and began examining that one instead. The winter wind whipped around my neck. Finally, his finger stopped.

'Ah,' he said. 'Anthony. Is that it? Anthony Middleton?'

'Yes, Corporal.'

He smiled at me warmly. 'Found you!'

I felt a huge rush of relief. Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all.

'You're not due until next week,' he said. And with that, his window slammed shut with another loud crack.

I was so stunned that all I could do was stand there, gazing at my reflection. Looking back at me in the glass I saw an immaculately presented, naive, skinny teenager with blue eyes and thick black eyebrows that met in the middle. A nice young lad with not a clue what to do. I walked back into the road with my head down but could only go so far before I had to put my bag down again.

What was I going to do? How the hell had I got the date wrong? I couldn't believe it. My mum and stepdad would be a couple of miles away by now. I scanned the muddy landscape in the vague hope I might spot a telephone box so I could call someone. There were trees bare of leaves, some far-off horses in a field and a flock of anonymous birds careening in the distance. There was no telephone box. And who would I call anyway? Where could I sleep? I had no sleeping bag, nor enough money for a B&B. Maybe I could find a dry spot out of the way by the barracks wall. How was I going to last a week in the wet with no food? How could I begin my British Army basic training course starving, soaking and probably ill?

I had a sudden, almost overwhelming urge to get as far away from the army buildings as quickly as possible. Instead, I put my head down, gritted my jaw and paced up the road, back towards those imposing black gates. I'd have to find somewhere to camp out in the dry and my best bet, I thought, was to use some of that man-made infrastructure. Once I was settled somewhere I'd come up with a plan. I tried to think positively. There must be a town not far away. I could find a call box there and get hold of Mum. I wasn't sure whether she'd come and get me, to be honest, but towns mean homeless people, and homeless people have shelters and maybe I could …

'Oi!' came a shout. 'Where you going, mate?'

I stopped and turned. On my way I'd passed a smaller brick guard hut. It hadn't looked occupied but a man in army fatigues was now hanging out of the door, barking at me.

'You can't go up there, mate.'

I stopped and turned back.

'This is a military area,' he said. 'What you doing here? Who are you?'

'I'm afraid I've got my dates wrong,' I told him with an embarrassed shrug. 'I have to come back next week, so …' I smiled, as if the whole thing was no bother at all.

'New recruit?' he said.

'Yes.'

He shook his head and pointed with his chin back towards the large guard house. 'Get over there and knock on his window,' he said. 'He's fucking with you.'

Half an hour later I found myself standing in a large, spotless room in a line-up of new recruits. We'd come from across the length and breadth of the British Isles in all shapes and sizes, young, spotty, greasy and hairy, none of us comfortable in our own skin and yet all of us desperately acting like we were. A corporal was walking up and down the lines of bodies, silently examining us with an unimpressed eye. The sound of his clicking heels echoed around the shining walls and polished floors. He seemed to tower over us, his spine erect, his broad shoulders filling out his shirt so that the khaki material stretched tightly against his skin. I tried to stop my eyes following him around the room but it was impossible. As he approached closer and closer to me, I forced them forwards and raised my chin just a little bit higher and puffed out my skinny chest as far as I could. The corporal stopped. He stopped right in front of me. My eyes widened. My heart froze.

'Name?' he said.

'Middleton, Corporal.'

He turned and bent down so that his face was barely an inch from mine.

'Middleton,' he growled. 'In the British Army we prefer our men to have two eyebrows.'

'Yes, Corporal.'

He walked on. My eyes didn't follow. My cheeks burned. I was intimidated, I was disorientated and was wondering what the hell I'd got myself into.

After some brief words from the corporal, we were sent to our accommodation block to settle in. We were shown into a big room with a gleaming parquet wooden floor. There were rows and rows of identical beds with itchy blankets, and wooden lockers with their doors hanging open. Everything in there was immaculate. Spotless. For the first time I felt almost at home: this was exactly how my stepfather had always forced us to keep house. I found myself a bed – a bottom bunk in a far corner of the block – and took the opportunity to have a scan of all the others. There must have been about thirty lads in there, some teenagers like me, others in their early twenties. I guessed it probably wasn't a coincidence that I'd been highlighted, like that, by the corporal. I looked different from the others. I wasn't like them. You could just tell.

The truth is, most of the young men who'd turned up for Basic Training that day were tough working-class lads who'd grown up immersed in the British culture of drinking, bantering and bashing the shit out of each other.

My childhood hadn't been anything like that. After my dad had died completely unexpectedly on 31 December 1985, my mother and stepfather had suddenly come into a lot of money. There was some confusion over my dad's true cause of death, but it was eventually ruled that he'd had a heart attack. This official verdict meant his life insurance could pay out. My mum and her new boyfriend Dean, who'd been around from almost the precise moment my dad passed away, were suddenly awash with money. The family moved from a three-bed house in Portsmouth to an eight-bed mansion outside Southampton.

Suddenly, everything was different. Me and my brothers were decked out in designer clothes, driven about in expensive cars and educated in the better private schools. My mum really started spoiling us. One Christmas it took us about three days to open all our presents. Then, when I was nine, the whole family upped and moved to northern France. We had a large, rambling plot of land with a big house that was once a farm on the outskirts of a town called Saint-Lô, twenty miles from Bayeux. I attended a well-respected Catholic school and was always neatly presented, and extremely polite and respectful. Almost overly so. People would love it when I came to their house because they knew the dishes would get done. I was a product of that much more gentle and civilised French culture.

I'd experienced my first hint of difference between the two nations on a visit back to the UK to see my maternal grandparents. There'd been a guy about the same age as me walking down the street, strutting along, and he just started staring at me. In French culture, you tip your hat, you're polite and respectful. When you pass someone in the street you say 'Bonjour' and 'Ça va?' So I said, 'All right?' He just glared at me like he wanted to kill me. I didn't realise he was doing that stupid young-lad thing of who can stare the other one out. I found it so strange. I just thought, 'What a weirdo.'

I couldn't have been more different from these people. I'd grown up in a place where fourteen-year-olds visit bars to drink coffee, not to down jugs of vodka Red Bull until they beat each other senseless, then puke.

I opened my bag, commandeered a locker and squared away all my kit, folding it neatly and piling it up. And then, as quickly as I could, I took my wash-bag and a disposable Bic razor to the toilet block. I popped the orange cap off the blade and held it under cold water, then, with a firm hand, I placed it on the base of my forehead and pulled it down over the black fuzz that connected my eyebrows. As I bent down to rinse the blade under the tap, I heard the voice of the corporal echoing

out of the nearby dormitory. 'Right, get your fucking PT kit on, you lot,' he barked. 'I want you lined up out on the parade ground in sixty seconds.'

I glanced up at the mirror to examine my handiwork. I couldn't believe it. I'd shaved off a wide rectangle of hair, the precise length of the razor, from above my eyes. The good news – I had two eyebrows. The bad news – I looked like I'd been run over by a tiny lawnmower. 'Fuck,' I muttered. I ran back into the dorm, dodging the squints and smirks, and got changed as quickly as possible into the physical training kit that had been left out for us, folded perfectly at the end of each narrow bed.

Out in the parade square we lined up in three rows in our green T-shirts and blue shorts. All I could do was pray the corporal didn't spot what I'd done to my face and decide to humiliate me all over again. He took his place in front of us on the tarmac and stood legs apart, his hands behind his back.

'I've got bad news for you lot,' he said, scanning the lines of faces, each of which was trying hard not to show the cold, jaws clamped, nostrils flaring. 'There's been a minor cock-up. We've got too many of you here. We don't have enough places. Not enough beds. "What does that mean?" I hear you ask. What it means is that some of you are going to have to stand back for two weeks and join the next intake.'

Was he being serious? Was this another wind-up? It was impossible to know.

'So how are we going to choose between you?' he continued. 'How are we going to make this fair? We're going to kick off this morning with a Basic Fitness test. We'll begin with a mile-and-a-half run. You'll have to complete that mile-and-a-half run in ten minutes or less, gentlemen. You'll be competing. This will be a race. And the prize for the winner, and only the winner, is one guaranteed bed.'

With that we were marched off the parade ground and through the maze of gloomy brick buildings until we reached an airfield on the edge of the base. As soon as we were shown the starting line we began jostling for position. I already had a good sense of where I stood in this pecking order. I didn't have much chance of beating some of these older, bigger, fitter lads. But I told myself I had to at least get into the front half of the pack.

Still jostling – elbows poking, shoulders barging, feet inching forwards – we watched the instructor take his stopwatch in one hand and a steel whistle in the other. The moment I heard that whistle scream, I pushed my way forwards in the pack as best as I could and launched into it with everything I had. I could feel the warmth of the bodies around me, hear the sound of pounding feet and the breathing, feel the muddy turf slip and yield beneath my boots. I pushed harder and harder, desperate to clear the mass, shoving this way and that, finding little routes through the bodies.

By the time I was halfway round the airfield I realised with a shock that there were only two men left in front of me. The sight of all the beautiful clear space in front of us spurred me on. I could feel myself surging with that angry competitive drive my stepfather had always instilled in me. I could practically see him there at the side of the field, with his big leather trench coat and his Rottweiler, shouting at me, telling me I wasn't giving it enough, that I needed to push harder. I'd fucking show him. I picked the first man off and left him comfortably behind, as spots of cold mud flecked my legs and heat burned in my knees. Two hundred metres to go. I took the last bend, my legs pounding. The last man and I were neck and neck, sprinting with everything we had. From out of nowhere I was hit with a flash of the humiliation I'd felt earlier. I imagined my competitor laughing at me. A furious thought entered my head: these bastards think I'm nothing. They think I'm some skinny, monobrowed, nice middle-class boy. I found myself surging forward, faster and faster. By the time I got to the finish line I was a full twelve seconds in front of him. I couldn't believe it. I'd won.

Following that race, I charged with everything I had into this brutal, confusing and sometimes thrilling new world. Every day of Basic Training that followed was painful. We'd have press-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, assault courses, cross-country running with heavy bergens on our back. With all that and the fieldcraft lessons, we'd hardly a minute to ourselves, and any minutes we did have were spent ironing our kit or making sure our lockers were immaculate. During our first proper inspection, I

was waiting by mine and the corporal stopped in front of the lad next to me, a nineteen-year-old called Ivan.

'You look like a bag of shit,' he shouted at him. 'Look at your fucking boots.' As Ivan looked down to see what he was talking about, the corporal punched him in the chest and sent him crashing through his locker, right through the wood at the back, which snapped in half. Ivan lay there, gasping like a fish, in a nest of splinters and dust. One thing I knew for sure: I wasn't in Saint-Lô anymore. I was going to have to toughen up.

At that time I'd only ever thrown one punch in my life, and that was only because the situation had been forced upon me. It had all happened when I was living with my mum and stepdad in Southampton, shortly before my family had left for France. I'd been having some problems with a bully, a guy a couple of years older than me who'd taken it upon himself to make my life as miserable as possible, tripping me up, throwing me against walls and just generally being dumb and menacing. I tried to avoid him as much as possible, but it inevitably started getting me down, to the extent that I didn't want to go into school anymore. When my stepfather noticed something was wrong, I made the mistake of telling him the details.

'Well, what are you doing about it?' he asked.

'Nothing,' I shrugged.

'Do the teachers know? Have you told them?'

'Of course not.'

'Anthony,' he said, 'listen to me. I do not want you to come back to this house until you've punched that boy square in the face. If you don't do that, do not come home tomorrow.'

I couldn't believe what he was saying. I didn't even know how to throw a punch.

'I can't do that,' I said, trying to reverse out of the living room and escape upstairs to my room. 'It doesn't matter.'

'I'm not fucking about, Anthony,' he said, barring my way. 'Until you've properly hurt him, don't even think about coming through this door again.'

The next time I came across the bully he was waiting in the dinner queue. I saw him before he saw me. He was holding a tray with a bowl of chips covered in steaming hot beans and a carton of Ribena on it. He was with his mates, I was alone. Despite the fact that I had no backup, I decided it was then or never. I walked up to him.

'I just want to put everything to bed,' I said. 'Is that all right? Do you want to shake hands?'

The bully just stood there, looking at me, dumb as an ox. To be fair, he was probably trying to work out how he was supposed to shake my hand when he was holding his tray. But whatever it was that was going through his head, I decided that that was my moment. I punched him square in the bridge of the nose. He fell back, chips and beans flying everywhere, cutlery and tray clattering to the ground. I didn't hang around to see what damage I'd done. I was gone.

Later that afternoon my stepfather received a phone call from the headmaster.

'I'm calling with unfortunate news,' he said. 'I'm afraid I've had to take the difficult decision to suspend Anthony from school for a period of one week.'

'Suspend him?' said my stepfather.

'I'm very sorry to have to let you know that Anthony physically assaulted another pupil today. We can't let something like that pass without taking appropriate steps.'

'Good,' he said. 'I'm glad to hear it.'

'Well, yes, you obviously understand then that even though this was very out of character for Anthony, we do have to …'

'No, no, no,' he interrupted. 'I'm not saying I'm glad you suspended him. I'm saying I'm glad he hit that prick. I told him to do it. How long did you say he was suspended for?'

'A week.'

'You'll see him in two.'

I can't deny there was a certain pleasure in seeing my tormentor caught under a scalding orange rainstorm of Heinz's finest, though to be honest I wasn't especially proud of myself for hitting back. It might have largely ended my problems with that particular bully, but it just didn't feel like who I was. I did at least manage to take one crucial bit of positivity out of it. From then on I knew I had that capacity within me. When push came to shove, I learned that I could react with some level of violence and cause a bit of damage. But that wasn't the only thing I learned. Over the two-week holiday from school that the punch had earned me, I played the scene over and over in my head. I'd obviously been scared before the moment I struck out, but what exactly had been the source of all that fear? What had been holding me back from sorting the problem out for so long?

I realised it was a dread of the unknown. I was scared of punching the bully because I didn't know what was going to happen next. He could have thrown hot food in my face. His mates could have piled on top of me and kicked me shitless. He could have barely flinched, calmly placed his tray to one side and then calmly broken my jaw. Anything could have happened. That, I realised, was the truth about most of the fear we'll experience in our lives. Humans don't like being in the dark about things. We hate not knowing what's behind the door. We like to be able to see the future, to put one foot in front of the other and walk through life steadily, carefully and predictably.

Learning to cope with deep states of doubt would be the journey of my life in the military. That's one of the things it teaches you – and it's a long, tough lesson, because it's going completely against the grain of your human nature. It was only years later, going into war zones as an operator, that I truly learned to cope with the fear of stepping into unpredictable situations. By that stage I knew that if I got to my target, I could act. I could punch through an enemy position, I could cope with being shot at and, if I needed to, I could pull that trigger and end a life. I had that capacity in me. And the seed of that capacity was planted way back when I was a boy, at that moment in the dinner queue.

When I was a new recruit at Pirbright, those lessons were still an extremely long way off. Three weeks after I'd seen that young lad being posted through a plywood wall, I found myself on the parade ground beside him. We were in formation, waiting for the corporal to arrive for inspection. Next to us, looking confused and out of place, was a new recruit called Neil. He'd joined our troop after falling out of Basic Training, having suffered a broken ankle on week five of his intake. Now he was mostly better, he'd been inserted back into the programme. Neil was a big, leery lad and slightly chubby round the middle, probably out of shape after being out of action for a while.

The problem was that Neil threw the numbers out. We were supposed to be arranged in rows of three, but now we had an odd number of bodies, so there was a gap at the front of our formation. I knew that in this eventuality you were supposed to arrange yourself in such a way that you still looked orderly from the front. The corporal was probably seconds away from rocking up and Neil was in the wrong place. He had to sort himself out, otherwise we'd all be in the shit. I flashed him a friendly smile.

'Mate,' I said to him. 'Why don't you jump up here, because the instructor's going to come any second?'

'Who the fuck are you?' he said, taking a step towards me.

Seeing what was about to happen, Ivan spoke up. 'All right, mate, he's only trying to help you out.'

'And what's your fucking problem?' said Neil.

'You're the one with the fucking problem.'

'Do you want to sort this out then?'

'All right.'

'Once we've knocked off tonight, I'll see you behind building 2D.'

I couldn't understand it. Why was Neil being such a dick? Did he feel, coming into a new troop, that he had to dominate people to get respect? Maybe it was that he'd clocked up a few weeks' more experience than us prior to his injury, and so when I told him where to stand he felt insulted. What

was the point of reacting like that? I'd been polite and respectful to him. If I'd have said the same thing in France, I'd have been thanked. But the UK was a completely different culture and these kinds of situations would probably be solved with aggression or outright violence.

'It's dog-eat-dog over here', I thought to myself. 'It really is every man for himself.' The cheeky and helpful manner that people found so charming at my mixed-sex French school were getting me nowhere quickly in this hardcore male-only environment. Rather than it winning me friends and allies, as it had over there, I was being met with an attitude of 'Who the fuck does this prick think he is?' I sensed there was something else going on too. People were defining me by my appearance and my polite cheerfulness. Neil, for one, had seen I wasn't a big lad and was reacting to that, judging me as beneath him. 'You little gobshite,' he seemed to be saying. 'I'm not taking orders from you.'

There was only one thing I could do. Everyone thought I was a soft lad, so I had to prove them wrong. I knew there was going to be a confrontation that night, and given the size differential between Neil and Ivan, my new pal was going to get pasted. As the dark silhouette of the corporal marched towards us, I silently decided I'd join him in the fight. I'd defend him as he'd defended me.

That day passed slowly. When the time came and I saw Ivan slip out of the accommodation block, I trotted after him down the dark path.

'What you doing?' he said.

'You were sticking up for me,' I explained. 'I'm part of this.'

'This is nothing to do with you,' said Ivan.

'I've got to stand up to this guy,' I said. 'I'm going to help you out, aren't I? Otherwise, who am I?'

I liked the way that sounded. Loyal. Tough. But Ivan just laughed in my face.

'It's just not you, Ant, is it?' he said. 'I'm not being funny, mate, but go on. Get back there and get your tea down you before it gets cold.'

I was furious. All my anxieties about what the others thought of me had been summed up in that one dismissive comment. Maybe it was Ivan I should be fronting up to, not Neil.

'How do you fucking know it's not me?' I said.

'Because you're better than that.'

Now that really did hit me, harder than any punch I might be about to take behind the kitchen block. The thing was, I could tell he meant it too. And he was right. What was I doing? Trying to prove I was one of them by turning myself into someone I wasn't? If they thought I was a soft lad, that was their problem. By trying to prove myself to them, I realised, I was actually submitting to them. I was letting them control me. But what was I going to do now? I could hardly leave Ivan to take a beating. I had to ask myself who I was. I was someone, I hoped, who was a bit smarter than the average green army recruit. I was someone who wasn't going to let ego and temper ruin my career. I realised that the only way to deal with this while remaining true to myself was to try to prevent the fight from happening at all.

'Why do you need to fight this guy anyway?' I said.

'You don't get it, Ant,' he said. 'It's not like it is where you come from. It's alpha male. It's who's got the biggest dick. You've got to step up to the plate.'

'We've just joined the army a few weeks ago,' I said. 'If word of this gets out or you tip up to parade with a black eye or a broken nose, they're going to know what's gone on.'

Ivan said nothing.

'You're risking your entire career to prove something to this idiot,' I continued. 'That's not very smart. Do you really care about what he thinks of you that much that you'll put everything on the line?'

He still said nothing.

'You're going to lose your career. You're sacrificing everything you've worked for, for Neil Porlock. You're letting him win, just by turning up.'

After that, it didn't take long to grind him down. He stopped, turned around, and instead of a fight, we went and had a cup of tea and a biscuit.

I can't help but look back on that incident with a bit of pride. Even at that young age, and in that tough environment, I was able to keep a grip on who I really was and sense that the alpha-male bully-boy culture was trying to mould me into someone else. Unfortunately, I can't tell you that I managed to maintain that strength of character. As you'll soon discover, I eventually let the worst of the army get the better of me. I became someone who couldn't have been further removed from that polite and gentle young lad.

It never ends, though. People always want to define you. Because these days I'm best known for the Channel 4 show *SAS: Who Dares Wins*, strangers try to define me all the time. They assume I'm this chippy rogue who deals with everything through violence. When they meet me, they expect me to have some hard, judgemental persona. I get people approaching me in the street and talking about my size. They imagine that I'm six foot eight, not five foot eight, and I always get, 'You look bigger on TV.' Or they say, 'I don't know what everyone's so worried about, I reckon I could have it with you.'

They're joking around when they come out with stuff like that … but also they're not. Otherwise, why would they say it? I just laugh it off. I've got nothing to prove. I'm in competition with no one, especially now I'm in the TV world. I mean, it's not as if I feel the need to compete with someone like Bear Grylls, is it? So I banter back with them. 'Yeah, mate, you probably could have me. Don't listen to all that TV stuff. They've got special lenses on their cameras that make me look bigger.' I'm happy to do that. I don't feel threatened at all. I know who I am.

But being an approachable guy doesn't mean I'm a pushover. When I work, I work. I think it's important not to mix business with pleasure. When there's a job to get done, I want to get it done and to the best of my ability. And I want to do it my way. This might sound arrogant, but in my field I genuinely believe that I'm the best at what I do. So while I think it's important to listen to others and not surround myself with Yes men, at the end of the day I'm the leader. I'll make sure the job's done properly, the way I want it done and to my standards. And I expect everyone else to be in that mindset. People know, when they work with me, that they need to snap into a different mode. There's no messing about.

But then when I'm not working I'm a loving father and husband, and I like to think I'm a relaxed guy to be around. That no-nonsense persona is completely gone. It's like I'm two different people. That's why I think it's crucial that you don't define yourself as just one person. That, to me, is the sign of a fake. It's the sign of someone who has this fantasy model of who they want everyone to think they are and just tries to act up to it all the time. When you're true to yourself you know that you're a different person in different situations, and you're totally relaxed about it.

I believe you can only get so far by trying to put on a persona. People who do that always hit a ceiling. They find themselves thinking, 'Right, I've got this far, now who do I have to be to get to this next stage?' If you're yourself, that won't happen. You'll find your own place. You'll get the job done the way you want it done. If you try to be someone else, you'll get lost, because the person who's got you to where you are is a total stranger. He's a fantasy. You don't know who he is. So when new challenges arrive, you'll have to suddenly come up with a different game plan, a different strategy, a different person to be. And that's not a sustainable pattern.

If you're yourself, you'll get to where you're going on your own instincts. There'll be no need to constantly second-guess yourself, thinking, 'Who do I have to be in this moment? How do I have to act? What do I have to say?' You'll be constantly rebooting yourself from scratch. You won't be growing and learning, you'll be panicking. You won't be giving yourself the chance to optimise. When you start on the first square of the grid of being yourself, with every new square you strive to get to you improve who you are. Every struggle you go through will make you a better player. That's what growth is. That's what life's journey is all about. It's about taking who you are and making you a better version of yourself. It's not about trying to be this person or that person. It's not about trying to be like Neil or Ivan. It's not about letting other people define who you are.

This is why I always tell people, don't try to better your life, don't try to better your work, don't try to better your relationships. Don't try to be rich, happy, successful. Don't do any of that. You'll be wasting your time. It doesn't work. Nothing will change, and you'll get disillusioned and burned out. Instead, you should work at trying to better who you are as a character. Be the best version of you that you can imagine, and I guarantee that all the rest of it will just fall naturally into place. Why? Because you're arming yourself. You're giving yourself the tools to be honest with yourself and therefore to be honest with other people. If someone in your life has messed up, you're not going to sit there being too nervous to talk to them about it.

What's not honest is always trying to be the person other people either want you to be or think that you are already. Back in Basic Training, because of the way I looked and spoke, everyone thought I was weak. I could have let that influence me and become weak. For a while I fought against it. There are always going to be people who want to define you by your worst qualities. They pick up on your flaws, zoom in on your most embarrassing and shameful mistakes, and decide that, deep down, that's the person you really are. What makes this especially dangerous is that it's so easy to believe. The trick is not to deny what these negative people are saying. If you do that, you'll look dishonest and inauthentic, and you'll lose the respect of anyone who does admire you. The best response is to accept what they're saying, but know it's only a small part of the truth. Everyone has flaws. Just be up-front about them.

Here's a scenario you might find it useful to think about. Imagine that your particular weakness is physical fitness. Someone has told you that you need to run five miles with a sixty-pound backpack on. If you were to turn around and say, 'Yeah, yeah, no worries at all,' nothing good's going to happen. But what about if you said, 'Actually, I'm going to struggle with that. Physical fitness is not my strong point. I will do it, I'll get the job done, but I need to let you know this is going to be a bit hard for me. I might need a push along the way'? When you're honest like that, I promise you that magical things will happen. People will think, 'This guy's comfortable with himself. He's not trying to be someone he's not. He's a person who is steadfastly defining himself. He's an honest person.' And they'll naturally want to help you out. They'll want to say, 'Do you know what, mate? I'll give you a hand.'

People don't get annoyed so much when you struggle, but when you fake it, that's when their walls come up. They get defensive. Then you're in conflict with that other person. There's friction and the job is not getting done. People think, 'If I admit my weaknesses, others will have less respect for me.' But it's actually the other way around.

But there's an exception to all this. Sometimes it's a good idea to let someone else define who you are. There are times in your life when someone will see something positive in you that you didn't realise was there. This is exactly what happened to me when, at the age of twenty-four, I was going through Royal Marines training. I'd got to week fifteen of the thirty-two-week course, at which point a new officer came in at the top of the hierarchy. He was an older boy, and everyone respected him. He'd only been there for a couple of weeks when he summoned me unexpectedly to his office. I couldn't imagine what he wanted: I was coming first in everything and keeping myself to myself, so there was no personal trouble with anyone else, at least that I knew about.

'Middleton,' he said, 'you're in danger of losing grip.' Losing grip? No I wasn't. I took a moment to make sure my face wasn't betraying my irritated confusion. 'I'm not quite sure what the problem is,' he said. 'Perhaps you're getting a bit too big for your boots or perhaps it's just that you're thinking about yourself too much. Well, whatever it is, I'm coming to the conclusion very rapidly that you're not a team man. You need to understand something that's crucially important if you want to achieve your full potential in this organisation. The Royal Marines aren't here to provide you with a pyramid to stand on top of. You, Middleton, are a part of that pyramid. You're just another brick. Do you understand what I'm getting at?'

'I think so, sir,' I said.

'You don't have to prove that you're the best. That's not what all this is about. I think you have a lot more to offer than merely being number one. You've got to think about the bigger picture. You might be leading all the scoreboards but you're not actually *leading*. The kind of men we prize here are the ones who bring the others with them. I think you have that in you.'

There was absolutely nothing I could say. He was right. All I wanted was to be the best at PT, the best at exercise, the first man at map-reading, and so on. I used to study alone. If tests were coming up about fieldcraft or map-reading I'd be in my corner, getting my head down, making it clear that no one should disturb me. I'd assumed that that's what success in the Forces looked like – dominating as many scoreboards as possible. My conversation with this officer was my first inkling that there was more to leading than simply being first. I realised I could afford to take a little bit of a back step and allow myself to be second or third at some things – to go for ninety per cent rather than one hundred.

At the time, all the lads were preparing for an important test that would assess our knowledge of everything we'd learned to date – fieldcraft, marksmanship principles, camouflage and concealment, the whole lot. I was aware that one skill a lot of the guys had struggled with was a particular way of identifying the cardinal directions. It was known as the 'stick and stone method'. You'd put a stick – a length about a foot and a half would do it – in the ground and mark the tip of the shadow it made with a stone. Then you waited twenty minutes. By that time the shadow would have moved. You'd put another stone where the new tip of the shadow was, and you'd know that the line between your two stones ran east to west.

After my meeting with the officer, I went back to my block, gathered my thoughts for a bit, then approached a gaggle of guys who were chatting in the corner. 'Are any of you lot struggling with the stick and stone method?' I asked them. About five men said yes. Then I went to the next block and asked them. When I'd been round all the blocks, I gave a demonstration outside to at least a dozen lads. This was my first experience of true leadership. And I loved it. The amazing thing was, it began to change me. The more I approached people, the more approachable I became.

I'd only been vaguely aware of it beforehand, but my being on my own all the time had been putting noses out of joint. Back in my army days I'd done the same thing and, as you're about to learn, it had led to disaster. But now, in the Marines, my problem had been picked up through effective training. Not only did that leader give me a new definition of success, he allowed me to enjoy my Marines experience more. Up to that point I'd just been pushing, pushing, pushing, my rev counter constantly in the red. But where can you go from there? And who's with you? You're up there by yourself. If you're alone, who's going to be there for you? Nobody. In the battlefield, that's not a trivial problem.

But all these essential lessons I'd learned with the Marines were still a long way off when I was that still all-too impressionable young lad doing Basic Training at Pirbright. The next chapter of my story wouldn't make itself known until I was in the final fortnight.

I was in my accommodation cleaning my boots when I heard a shout: 'Middleton!' I ran to the door and stood to attention.

'255700 Sapper Middleton reporting for duty.'

'You're wanted in the office, Middleton.'

I marched over to the office and found the commanding officer behind the desk, with his mugs, piles of paperwork and little flags.

I had barely banged out a salute before he said, 'All right, Middleton, come in. We're going to need you on the parade square in a couple of hours, to go through the drill.'

'The drill, sir?'

He looked up at me. 'Yes, Middleton, the drill. For the passing-out parade.'

The passing-out parade? OK. But everyone was going to be at the passing-out parade. Why had he asked only me to go through the drill?

‘You’ll be picking up your awards,’ he said, reading my thoughts. ‘So you’ll need to familiarise yourself with the ceremony.’

‘Awards, sir?’

‘Yes, Middleton. Best at physical training. Best all-round recruit. You know, I don’t remember anyone ever having won both before. So well done.’

I couldn’t help but let off the most enormous grin.

‘Have you given any thought to your next move?’ he asked me.

‘I have, sir,’ I said. ‘I want to join 9 Parachute Squadron.’

‘You want to jump out of planes,’ he said.

I smiled again.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Very good, Middleton.’

9 Para. Airborne! I couldn’t believe it. The opportunity to join this legendary squadron, and wear a maroon beret, was a dream come true. All through training, whenever an instructor appeared wearing a maroon beret and parachute wings, everyone worshipped him. The Parachute Squadron were above the regular army. It gave you automatic respect. Actually, it was more than respect. It was godlike. Out of all the challenges I could have taken on next, none would be more thrilling than the ‘All Arms Parachute Course’, which is known as ‘P Company’. I’d never been happier, nor had more confidence in my ability to excel. I had absolutely no idea what was waiting for me.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Don’t let anyone else define who you are. People always make rapid judgements about what sort of person you are from their first impressions, and sometimes these first impressions will be negative. It’s so easy to take that on board and simply fall into the mould that other people put you in. Have the strength to realise what’s happening and ensure that you define yourself. Meet that negativity with positivity, every single time.

Always have a plan. And make sure that no part of that plan is ‘give up’. If I’d had to camp out for a week under a hedge outside Pirbright Camp and wash every day in a stream, then that’s what I would have done.

Keep that plan dynamic. Don’t be that stubborn leader who, for reasons of pride, refuses to change his plan when new information presents itself. You might think you’re asserting your leadership by sticking resolutely to your plan, but you’re undermining it. Your team will lose respect for you, and that’s the beginning of the end.

Fear of taking action is fear of the unknown. True leaders don’t underestimate the potential destructive power of what lies behind that door, but neither do they let that stop them bursting through it, as long as it’s done carefully and intelligently.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.