Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Boy Soldier

written by

Andy McNab

And Robert Rigby

published by

Corgi Books

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

GLOSSARY

Alabama lie detector	*Baton used by some US police forces*
Bomb burst	*Split up*
Contact	*In a fire fight with the enemy*
CTR	*Close target recce*
Cuds	*Countryside*
Dead ground	*Ground that cannot be seen*
DMP	*Drug manufacturing plant*
ERV	*Emergency rendezvous*
FARC	*Colombian drug traffickers*
FOB	*Forward operating base*
IBs	*The elite of the Secret Intelligence Service*
LUP	*Lay-up point*
Mag	*A weapons magazine that holds the rounds*
Maggot	*Sleeping bag*
Make ready a weapon	*To put a round in the chamber, ready to be fired*
MoD	*Ministry of Defence*
MOE	*Method of entry*
NVGs	*Night viewing goggles*
OP	*Observation post*
Pinged	*When someone is first seen*
Recce	*Reconnaissance*
The Regiment	*What SAS soldiers call the SAS*
RIB	*Rigid inflatable boat*
Rounds	*Bullets*

RV	*Rendezvous (meeting place)*
SOP	*Standard operating procedure*
On stag	*On guard*
Stand to	*Get ready to be attacked*
UGS	*Underground sensor*
VDM	*Visual distinguishing mark*

SURVEILLANCE TALK

Complete	*Inside any location – a car, building, etc.*
Foxtrot	*Walking*
Held	*Stopped but intending to move on – i.e. at traffic lights*
Mobile	*Driving*
Net	*The radio frequency the team talk on*
Roger	*OK or understood*
Stand by! Stand by!	*Informs the team something is happening*
Static	*Stopped*
The trigger	*Informs the team that the target is on the move*

HACKING TALK

Exploits	*Hackers' targets*
Root access	*When the hacker has control of the system under attack*
Script kiddie	*Novice hacker*
Script	*A program written by a hacker*
Spoofing	*Hiding a computer's IP address*

PROLOGUE

1997, Colombia

Fergus had chosen the base camp carefully. He was always careful. Being careful had kept him alive during his twelve years in the Regiment and now that he was operating alone nothing was going to change.

The jungle floor was wet and muddy and covered with decaying leaf litter. Strong shafts of sunlight, as tight and bright as spotlights, speared through the tree canopy high above, illuminating the almost airless clearing.

The morning rains had stopped thirty minutes earlier but water constantly dripped from the canopy, and every small insect that flew or crawled seemed determined to take a bite out of Fergus. It was hot and sticky and uncomfortable, but then comfort never had been the top priority in his line of work. Staying alive had.

On SAS operations Fergus had learned the hard way about the seven Ps – Prior Planning and

Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance – so before setting up the base camp he'd made certain that two escape routes were available in the event of a surprise attack.

Carefully disguised rat runs had been cut into the undergrowth on either side of the camp. One led deeper into the jungle; the second went towards the river, where the four inflatable Zodiacs were hidden and camouflaged, just a metre or two from the water's edge. Their fuel bladders were still connected to the engines, their bows faced the water. They were ready to be launched within seconds.

Fergus stood facing the young guerrillas. They didn't look happy.

'Again,' said Fergus, in Castilian Spanish, keeping it as simple as he could. 'We do it again. Do like I do.'

One of the Colombians sighed and muttered to his friends. Fergus didn't understand what was said – the words came too quickly – but he knew exactly what was meant. They were bored; they didn't want to spend time stripping down and cleaning their AK-47 assault rifles. They wanted to use them.

Fergus held his AK in his right hand and the curved, thirty-round magazine in the left. He checked the top of the mag to make sure the shiny brass rounds were seated correctly before placing it in the assault rifle's mag housing and listening for the reassuring click as it locked into position. Then he gave the mag a quick shake to make sure it was fully home.

'Now you,' he said to the sweat-drenched guerrillas. 'Just do what I did.'

Fergus could load, unload and strip down a weapon with his eyes closed – he had done, thousands of times – but now he kept his eyes on the twelve young men as they copied his actions. Young men? They were kids, most of them not yet twenty and the youngest maybe seventeen.

Most were dressed in ripped jeans and old Brazil or Man U football shirts. Some had thin, wispy beards. It was as though they were trying to prove they really were man enough, mean enough and brave enough to be FARC guerrillas. The younger boys were smooth-faced; they probably hadn't even started to shave.

Their faces were sullen and sulky. They hadn't left their poverty-stricken villages to clean rifles. They wanted to make their fortunes. They wanted action.

They were about to get it.

The attack came suddenly, without warning and at the worst possible moment. The government troops must have been watching, waiting for the perfect time to strike.

Fergus heard the helicopter gunships first. The deep, throaty growl of the engines, immediately followed by the ominous chop of the rotor blades. The tree canopy swayed and shifted and rainwater came cascading down.

'Shit,' murmured Fergus, as he looked up and saw the first helicopter overhead. 'Stand to! Stand to!'

The guerrillas ignored the command. Most of them simply panicked and started to run towards the boats,

unaware that a gunner was already lining them up through the sights of the heavy machine gun mounted in the doorway of the gunship.

Fergus grasped the pieces of his own rifle and dived to the ground. *'No!'* he shouted, rolling away through the mud. 'Not the boats! Stay away from the boats! Stay low, stay low!'

But it was already too late. Bullets thudded into the wet earth as the young Colombians hurtled towards the river, their weapons forgotten and abandoned. The youngest boy, Nino, stood rigid, petrified like a rabbit in car headlights, his eyes wide with fear.

The camp was surrounded: ground troops were approaching from all sides and shouted orders were drowned out by the sound of automatic gunfire. The attack had been expertly planned, and Fergus felt a moment of professional admiration as he mechanically loaded his AK.

He grabbed the terrified boy and dragged him towards the forest escape route. Before they had moved more than a few paces Fergus heard a stifled cry, felt Nino jerk away and turned to see him falling into the leaf litter. Blood oozed from his head.

Fergus was hit before he could return fire. The bullet smashed into his thigh and sent him spinning away, face down in the mud. Searing pain burned through his body. He lifted his head and saw blood-red bone protruding from the gaping wound in his leg.

The thudding sound of heavy machine-gun fire drifted back from the river. Fergus knew that the guerrillas who had made it to the boats would have

been picked off by the helicopter gunships and that, by now, their bodies would be floating downstream.

And then it was all over. The firing stopped as quickly as it had begun. Fergus tried to crawl towards the undergrowth as he heard more shouted commands and then men running towards him. He was grabbed by the shoulders and turned over. Four Colombian soldiers stared down at him, their camouflaged faces glistening with sweat as they jabbed their rifle barrels into his face and excitedly shouted to their commander. 'Gringo! Gringo!'

Two of the troopers moved aside and an officer wearing the uniform of the Anti-Narcotics Police stepped through. He smiled at Fergus, reached into the breast pocket of his camouflaged combat jacket and took out a photograph. He looked at the photograph and laughed, then beckoned to a paramedic before viciously kicking Fergus in his wounded leg.

The agonized scream echoed away into the jungle.

1

2005, Army RCB Centre, Wiltshire, England

Danny was running. His pace was as steady and constant as his breathing; he moved with a natural rhythm. This was what he'd been waiting for – at last he was really showing what he could do.

Sometimes when Danny ran, when he was training, he would wear a Walkman and sing to himself under his breath, fitting the tempo of the song to his strides. It helped maintain the pace and stopped him from getting bored on a long run. But not today. Today he was focused. He wanted to win, even though they'd been told it wasn't a race. But Danny still wanted to win. He always did.

He was way ahead of the others as he approached the stream. The muddy stretch of water was too wide to clear without the aid of the strong rope dangling invitingly from the thick branch of a tree. Danny's eyes narrowed as he neared the edge and without breaking his stride he leaped into the air, grabbed the rope with both hands and swung effortlessly across to the other side.

The watching NCO smiled his approval and checked the list of names on his clipboard. 'Good effort, Mr Watts, keep it going,' he boomed as Danny ran on towards the high wall.

Danny grinned. *Mister* Watts. Him? He couldn't remember anyone calling him Mister Watts before. A few other things maybe, but never Mister. But it was all so different here.

When they'd assembled on Day One, nervous and self-conscious, a sergeant had told them they would all be referred to as Mister. 'That's because officers are gentlemen,' he said. 'And that includes potential officers like yourselves.'

Danny wasn't bothered what they called him – General Watts, for all he cared – just as long as he got one of the Regular Commissions Board bursaries at the end of the three-day selection course. He had to get a bursary; it was the only way he could possibly afford to take up a university place and then go on to Sandhurst Military Academy.

And the weeks of preparation were paying off. Danny had sailed through the medical and fitness tests, handed in a decent current affairs essay, and if the rest of his written work wasn't exactly *University Challenge* standard, he was pretty sure he'd done well enough. In the briefings and interviews he had been confident but not cocky. He'd even laughed at the officers' bad jokes.

He knew they were being assessed at every moment, and that included their relaxation time. So when a few of the others got stuck into pints of bitter in the mess,

Danny stuck to Diet Coke. It was no big sacrifice – he couldn't stand the taste of beer anyway.

One 'real ale man' ended up making a total prat of himself, downing four pints in less than an hour. It was three and a half pints too many: he threw up on the floor before being dragged off to bed. The duty officer wasn't impressed and neither was the steward who had to mop up the vomit.

Four Pints, as the others named him, woke up the next morning to a king-sized bollocking that did nothing to make his hangover feel better.

But it was a useful reminder to Danny to get everything right. This was his one chance, he had to take it, and with the assault course run being the final event it was all working out perfectly.

He clambered over the two-metre-high wall and sprinted the final hundred metres to the finish line, where a waiting sergeant clicked a stopwatch and made a note of his time. 'Very good, Mr Watts, very good indeed. Says on your application that you've run for your county.'

'Middle distance and cross country.'

'And is that something you'd wish to continue in the army?'

Danny paused before answering, reminding himself to say the right thing. 'As long as it didn't get in the way of my other duties.'

The sergeant laughed. 'I shouldn't worry about that, Mr Watts, the army always wants to sponsor top quality athletes. Look at Kelly Holmes – she did ten years in the army and look at her now: double Olympic gold medallist. Take my advice, you stay in training.'

'I will, sir. Thanks.'

'Sir? I'm no Sir. I work for a living.' The NCO pointed at the three small green stripes sewn onto his combat jacket. 'It's Sergeant. Now get yourself off to the showers while I wait for the also rans.'

As Danny jogged away towards the changing rooms he could see the next few years panning out exactly the way he'd planned. University, then Sandhurst and then a commission as an officer in the infantry. And on top of that, they might even pay him to run. It couldn't get any better.

The selection course ended with an after-lunch debriefing from the colonel in charge. He was a red-faced, cheerful old boy who told them exactly what they expected to hear: they'd all done very well and it had been one of the best RCBs he could remember.

'Bet he says that every time,' whispered someone sitting behind Danny.

The stifled laughter died away as the colonel reminded them that with only a certain number of bursaries available, some of them were going to be disappointed.

Thirty minutes later they were in the reception area waiting for the coach that would take them to the train station. They were a mixed bunch: a few, like Danny, comprehensive kids, but the majority public school, Officer Training Corps and Army Cadet Corps.

Some were from old military families. Four Pints had boasted he could trace his family all the way back to Wellington and the Battle of Waterloo. That was just before he was sick.

As far as Danny was concerned Waterloo was the place where he changed trains on his way back to Camberwell. Military history could wait until Sandhurst. Firm footsteps sounded from along the corridor and the sergeant from the assault course approached. 'Mr Watts?'

'Sergeant?'

'Good lad, got it right that time. With me, please, Colonel's office. Leave your bag there.'

The sergeant turned away and retraced his steps down the corridor and Danny felt the eyes of the other candidates on him.

'Looks like you're in,' said Four Pints, with a wink. 'Must have been your run that did it.'

Danny hurried after the sergeant, his thoughts racing. Was that it? Was he in? The colonel had said letters to the successful candidates would go out the following day.

They reached the colonel's office at the end of the corridor and an abrupt, 'Come,' was called in response to the sergeant's firm knock. He opened the door, nodded for Danny to go through and then pulled the door shut. His combat boots echoed away down the corridor.

The man seated on the far side of the dark wooden desk was not the colonel. He was blond-haired, mid forties, and in his slick, dark blue suit and custard-yellow and red striped tie, looked every inch a top civil servant. Danny recognized the tie – he'd once been on a school trip to a Test Match at Lord's and had seen dozens of them worn by the MCC members in the pavilion.

A half-full cup of coffee stood on the desk. The man was studying a buff-coloured army RCB file with

Danny's photograph stapled to the front of the cover. He spoke without looking up. 'Sit.'

Danny obediently sat in the chair on the near side of the desk but felt his face flush. He wanted to say, 'Look, mate, I'm not a dog, and what happened to *Mister* Watts?' But he didn't.

A clock on the wall ticked loudly. Danny realized he was counting the passing seconds until, at last, the man looked up. 'The Regular Commissions Board will be turning down your application for a bursary, Watts.'

The words stunned Danny like a surge of electricity. 'But . . . but why? I did well on everything. I passed the medical, my written tests were good. Good enough.'

The man shrugged. 'Hardly Einstein.'

'And I won the assault course race.'

'Yes, you can run, Watts, you can certainly run. And while your predicted A-level grades are adequate for a place at one of the modern so-called universities, we all know that education standards are slipping. But the army is looking for better than average, Watts. We want the cream.'

He seemed to be enjoying it, taunting Danny, deliberately winding him up. 'On the other hand, if you made your own way through university and, by some miracle, exceeded expectations, you could apply for a commission. But . . .'

The thin smile was more like a sneer, and the way he left the 'but' dangling in mid air made it perfectly clear to Danny that he had virtually no hope of ever becoming an army officer.

'I don't have family to pay for university.'

Another thin smile. 'I am aware of that.'

Danny was fighting to hold back his anger. 'You knew my predicted grades. What's the point of getting me down here and putting me through all this if it's just to turn me down?'

'We believe in equal opportunities for all.'

Danny snapped. He stood up and banged a fist on the desktop. 'That's bollocks.' The man raised an eyebrow but said nothing and Danny had no alternative but to bluster on. 'It's because I'm not from the right background. I don't speak with a posh accent like you and I didn't go to the right school. I thought all that family crap was a thing of the past in the army.'

The reply was totally calm and measured. 'The working-class chip on the shoulder doesn't help either, Watts.' He let the application form drop onto the desk and raised his voice slightly. 'Now sit down.'

Danny sank back onto the chair, and the thought that perhaps all this was deliberate flashed through his mind. Another test. Of his ability to withstand pressure and provocation. If it was, he'd failed it. Big time.

'You need to learn to control your temper, Watts. And contrary to what you believe, family connections still play a very important part in the army. Your own, for example.'

'Mine?' Danny looked as bewildered as he felt. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

This time there was no smile. The man got up from his chair, walked round to Danny, and sat back against the desk. 'When did you last see your grandfather?'

'My—'

'Fergus Watts?'

'I . . . I've never seen him. Ever.'

'Are you certain about that?' The laid-back, laconic style had gone; Danny's interrogator was now firing in questions like rounds from an AK-47. 'Has he tried to make contact?'

'Not with me, no. And what's he got to do with this?'

'Not with you? What do you mean by that?' He leaned closer. 'Answer me, Watts.'

Danny could smell the coffee on the man's breath. His own mouth went dry. It wasn't meant to be like this. 'Someone contacted social services and asked about me, when I was sixteen. I don't know who it was. If it was my granddad he never got in touch.'

The man stared into Danny's eyes. His look was almost hypnotic, probing. Finally he seemed satisfied. He moved away and went back to his chair. 'Fergus Watts betrayed his country and his regiment. You knew he was SAS?'

Danny shook his head. 'I knew he was in the army, that's all.'

'There are certain matters we need to clear up with your grandfather, and if you could help us in any way . . .' He picked up the application form again. 'Well . . . there will be other RCBs.'