

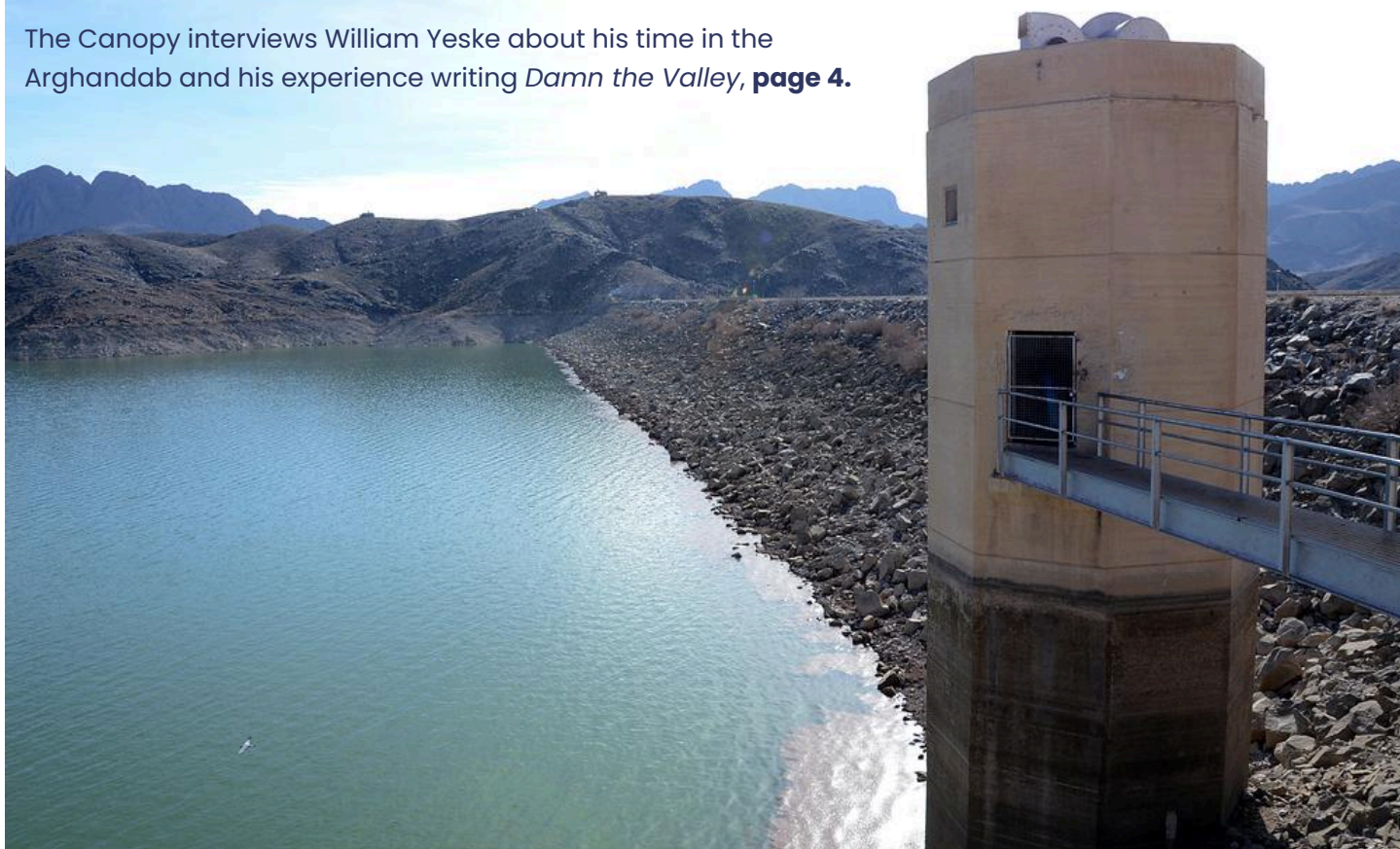
The Canopy

North Central Florida All Airborne Chapter

Issue 2 / Volume 32 / October 2024

Damn the Valley Author, William Yeske

The Canopy interviews William Yeske about his time in the Arghandab and his experience writing *Damn the Valley*, **page 4**.



"U.S.-funded dam on the Arghandab River in Helmand province" – Photo by William Dowell, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Headquarters, 18 Jan 2014.

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Upcoming Events

Saturday, Oct 12th, 1300 hrs VFW Post 8083
 12666 US-441
 Belleview, FL 34420

From The Editor

I'm proud to showcase the interview with Will this month. We were able to meet during the national convention this year. Will is a great guy and a real asset to the airborne community. On the note of community - every time I see a paratrooper license plate, an airborne unit sticker, or a jump wing tattoo, I get in touch with the person. Make it a point to get out there and say hello, shake a hand, and let them know about our monthly meetings. As our chairman says, if you get one out of a hundred to show up, you're doing good. I'm not quite up to one-hundred introductions yet, but I'm working my way up! If we all do what we can for outreach, we might see some new faces at our next meeting.



Airborne! All The Way!

Ron Dahlgren

Editor, The Canopy

<https://www.the-canopy.org>

Chairman's Message

October is already here and 10 weeks till Christmas Party. I've been out of the net in Europe for almost three weeks so I have to hit the street running. We've got to start planning for the big event now. It will be held at the VFW on Dec 14 Saturday at 12:30 p.m. We'll meet for social hour at 12:00 p.m. so support the VFW bar if you need a high ball. If you know you are coming please pick up a meal order form at the meeting in Oct. I've been talking with Mission BBQ and the VFW for catering needs. At the September meeting it was suggested that we give the VFW our business since they've been our gracious host for our monthly meetings over the years. By the time we meet for October's meeting we'll have it nailed down. Our Service Officer Joyce will be handling decorations and other things so if you can help, reach out to her or let me know. It's a lot of work getting the place decorated and place settings etc. I was able to get Dan Marrin to play for us. He's becoming our go to guy for entertainment. He has a sense of service that is unmatched because he plays for free to give back to groups of people especially Veterans. What motivation he has, speaking of which I'd like to see the number of members coming to our meeting bumped up a little more. Because we only meet once a month it's important to see what's going on with your Chapter. Remember the next meeting is OCT 12 (That's the 2nd Saturday of the month!) Also, I'm working on a guest speaker. Coordinating all these things gets complicated and time consuming. Finally, I'm asking the Chapter to start thinking about our leadership and Executive Board. It would be great if some of you would step up and put your hat in the ring. I'm asking our Vice Chairman, Secretary and a member at large to form a committee to search out some prospective prospects for leadership positions. We'll hold the elections at the November meeting. Hope to see you on the manifest for our Oct meeting.



Airborne!

Tony Alger, Chairman, North Central Florida All-Airborne Chapter

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Our 2024 Booster Goal is \$500

Start 50% Complete!



Damn the Valley author, **William Yeske**

July 5th, 2024 – The Canopy spoke with Will by phone over the Summer. We were in contact about his recently released book. Will has an easy manner and brings a lot of energy to the conversation. I asked him about realizing that a book needed to be written about his deployment. He only had a single deployment during his time, so the choices were limited. He describes his company first sergeant as describing this deployment as the worst in his 24 years of service. The book describes a grueling op tempo and a grinding IED threat.

Talking about the transition at the start of that deployment, I asked if the unit they were replacing could have changed the situation. Will described the troubles in the Arghandab valley dating back to the Soviets. The Stryker bears a strong resemblance to the Soviet BMP. The Soviets brought a motorized brigade of BMPs in the 1980s that was completely torn up by the valley. Back in the 1880s, British journals described difficulty with combat in the same area.

For this deployment, Will's unit went everywhere dismounted. They kept their faces out in the open – avoiding the neck gaiter and glasses look that my unit embraced during our time in Afghanistan. The 508th tried to connect more with the villagers. Not to the extent of a civilian affairs unit, but to make some connection. When I was there in 2002–2003, we intentionally chose to hide our eyes to keep a power imbalance when out patrolling. Will was out as a 28 man element, operating as a platoon in the Arghandab. This is unusual for the conventional military.

As the platoon RTO, Will would sometimes get tapped for two patrols per-day. Supporting squad level patrols out of the firebase. The platoon was right next to the village, living right alongside them. Will describes having a village boy bring Naan bread for the platoon regularly. At some point, his command put an end to that.

There were SF ODAs and JSOC elements in the same area. Part of Will's unit's activities included putting together information for targeting packets for these other units. With the right amount of actionable intelligence, the partner units could do nighttime raids on the targets. His unit's way of operating fostered some collaboration with villagers. They intentionally avoided an invader vibe.

When I was last in Afghanistan, in 2005–2006, we checked on construction projects – specifically for schools, I recall. One of the companies in Will's battalion had a school in their area. Will didn't have any provincial reconstruction teams embedded with them – something I recalled from my time. At one point, they did have a reporter out from a national news agency.

The book provides a large amount of details that brought me back. Things I had not thought about or talked about in years. For instance, resupply air drops. Will describes getting mail and supplies sling-loaded in periodically and that was it. I remember my own time watching a supply drop glide down to the ground outside our firebase. Another case is the ANCD – a small black device for controlling radio crypto settings. I had failed to remember the name of that device for years until I read a story about it in Will's book.

Other than a multitude of uniform changes, the time of his deployment and my own featured a lot of the same equipment. We received a lot of gear from the "rapid fielding initiative" – RFI. Will says they similarly received a bunch of gear special for deployments. They did not have the MOLLE racks that I was patrolling with, but did receive a replacement for the IOTV vest that was better at distributing heat.

The one piece of kit I really hated from that period was the MOLLE rucksack. These were gigantic multi-pouch beasts with a top storage area that would pin your head down in the prone. They had a plastic frame that could not survive regular field use – much less airborne operations! Will was issued the same rucksack. My unit switched back to the ALICE pack. These packs allegedly came from the Marine Corps who

claimed to have a good experience with them. The airborne infantry were not impressed. I was surprised they were still being issued six years later. Will had to train with all this same gear. I'm surprised.

Will is a gear enthusiast (aka nerd). This comes across clearly in *Damn the Valley*. I think from my own time in and suspect I would have been hemmed up by my platoon sergeant, first sergeant, and any other senior NCO if I'd try some of Will's tricks. He didn't always get away with modified gear, though. In one instance, Will had a triangle NOD mount on his helmet. When he added it, it was a brand new item on the market. Will took his helmet to an auto shop and had the mount holes drilled and mounted. When Will showed up wearing it, his first sergeant said "What the fuck is that?!" – Will was an E-3 at that point. He had to go find another helmet immediately. Add to this the fact that Will was known to have come from the 18X program (the so-called special forces baby program).

The book is a real treat. There are few books that capture the conventional military's experience during this time in the Afghan war. It's an up-close telling of the experience. You won't find grand strategies or critiques of the big picture here. I strongly identified with the "I'm hot and it sucks" vibe.

Will connected with many of the people from his deployment to work through details and experiences in the book. He was able to connect with the guys through Facebook groups and a convention they had a couple of years back. A few were still difficult to connect with, but for the most part Will found success. Some of the guys had some issues with the writing of the book. Will persisted over several months by sending excerpts, manuscripts, etc. asking for feedback. Eventually Will received a response of gratitude that the story is being told.

Will is not a professional writer. He is quick to make that distinction, communicating some vulnerability in his work. After reading *We Few: U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam* by Nick Brokhausen, Will found a relatable style of writing about combat

experiences. "People do present stories like this... OK."

Will had previously reached out to John Stryker Meyer about experiences with old teammates having issues with their book being told. One of Will's colleagues was angry about another book written about that deployment. He felt left out and looked over. Will spoke with him and learned he had not reached out to that book's author.

On the other hand, some of the guys had plenty of stories to share. Some of the stories Will heard from his guys struck him as a little far-fetched. I remembered a patrol of mine in Afghanistan where one of our squad leaders was convinced he was seeing a UFO in the sky off in the distance.

Will says his book publishing experience was easier than expected. This is surprising as a first time, novice author. He wrote the 60,000 word first draft over the course of two weeks. He found a valuable resource in the editorial staff of his publisher. The initial contact was made by clever use of LinkedIn. Starting with the low-level staff and leveraging that to connect with the decision-makers at the organization. The editing process took about a year, but no material changes came from the editor. Will, like all artists, is his biggest critic. He calls out some blemishes that I failed to notice on reading.

Will's experience is inspiring to learn. Another book from his battalion's experience in the Arghandab comes out this month (October 2024). I hope that seeing these stories from our war experience leads other veterans from my era to share their stories. The conventional army did very long grueling deployments that our special forces partners did not experience. Their stories should be told. Will encourages people to send their stories out there. He describes reading the manuscript of a friend who was worried it would never shape up – in Will's words, "Man, this is like a finished book compared to my first manuscript".

There is a thing with art where it's never subjectively finished. Will continues to rework and rewrite pieces of his story, expecting maybe it will land in a new book eventually. I hope with the time

and distance since the deployments of that era, we can expect more stories to be told.

Jumps in Division

When I joined the 82nd, the first jump in division, the "cherry jump" was a bit of a ceremony. In Will's unit, at that time, the thing was to have a cherry pie in your cargo pocket for the jump. He managed to avoid that particular ritual. He avoided a lot of the fun and games being the older guy in the junior enlisted. Never pink-bellied. I had heard stories about spray-painted white helmets with shark fins. Never seen it myself.

For Will's final jump in division, he was treated to a cigarette roll. He jumped out and thought, "this doesn't feel right: I leaned back and I look up and I just see straight streamers detached from the plane". He pulled his reserve and rode it in without issue. A few years ago, a meme went out with a paratrooper jumping with a fighting fish and sharing the experience. That was the same jump as Will's experience.

Will had a few Blackhawk jumps but no Chinook jumps. I've had a single blackhawk jump and no Chinook jumps. hilariously, my own jump log shows a Chinook jump and no Blackhawk. Will had a lot of Casa jumps out at Camp Mackall. These reverse bite tail jumps were fun for him. One time, the static line in front of him went flying but he was able to dodge it without getting wrapped up. He accumulated just over 40 jumps during his time in.

When Will brought the flag from his book back down to the museum. He went by to check on his old unit and found them prepping to go on a night jump - some things never change!

Staying Connected

Will stresses that it's important to stay connected with your peers from the time in service. Myself, I stay off social media - no Facebook or anything else. With that out there, Will describes group connections he has maintained through regular Zoom meetings organized by one of their people. The lack of representation of the

GWOT era in our associations is troubling to me. Will agrees that in-person meetings are important and there's no real substitute. Operation Resiliency makes a point to organize in person get togethers. Will hopes some of the social media attention through the book will help to draw people out to reconnect. He describes TikTok and YouTube content going viral from content recorded on his deployment. The content received 7.4 million views within two weeks. This bump in attention spilled over onto his book. The pictures and conversations around the book provide a meeting place for veterans to connect.

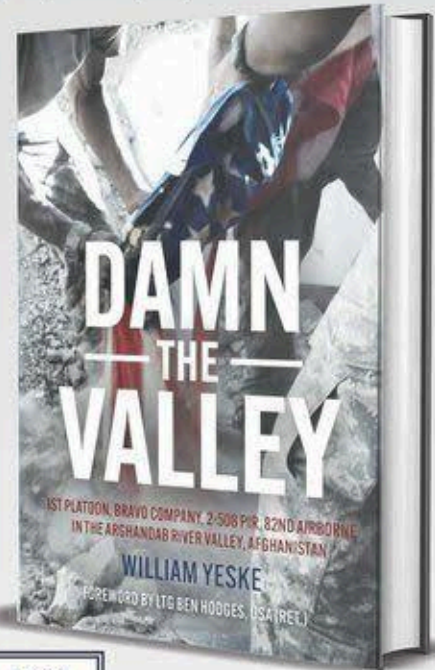
The flag from the front cover of the book now resides in the Airborne and Special Operations Museum in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Several other artifacts, including a life-saving PMAG, are in the museum as well. On the other side of the balance, an IED ball-bearing that went through a service member, complete with melted kevlar weave on it, made its way there as well. On the weird side, a trooper was sentenced to write a paper after a small OPSEC incident. Will has that paper.

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DAMN THE VALLEY

1st Platoon, Bravo Company, 2/508 PIR, 82nd Airborne in the Arghandab River Valley Afghanistan

By William Yeske / Foreword by LTG Ben Hodges, USA (Ret)



Hardcover • 9781636243658 • \$34.95 • 2023

“A riveting, unsparing, gritty, first-hand account of life in a great airborne unit that engaged in some of the toughest fighting in Afghanistan, in “the Arghandab,” a district whose name became a metaphor for brutal close combat against tenacious enemies. *Damn the Valley* captures vividly the intense dynamics and relationships in the brotherhood of the close fight in the toughest imaginable conditions - and also the extraordinary reliance of paratroopers on their airborne buddies on their left and right and their leaders. A great read!”

- General David Petraeus, former Commander of the Surge in Iraq, US Central Command, and NATO/US Forces in Afghanistan; former Director of the CIA; & co-author of *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine*

“Yeske provides a riveting account of the brutality and unforgiving nature of direct combat from the paratroopers who had to deal with it in one of the most dangerous and contentious areas and times of the Afghan War. He also clearly articulates the interpersonal nature of small unit combat, and his writing makes the reader feel as if they are there, on patrol, or under fire with him and his buddies. I recommend this book to any small unit leader to understand what combat is about and to any leader in general to understand what our troops at the tactical level must endure during extended combat.”

- John Wayne Troxell, SEAC (Ret), USA, 3rd Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman, JCS, & author of *Surrender or Die! Reflections of a Combat Leader*



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Ft. Benning, GA, airborne graduation November 2001. Photo provided by Ron Dahlgren.

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