



The Canopy

Issue 3 / Volume 33 / March 2025

Interview with Andrew Bragg

Author of *The Devil's Playground*

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From The Chapter

February meeting

Read more on page 7.



Chapter Officers

Position	Name
Chairman	Tony Alger
Vice Chairman	Gary Blasczienski
Treasurer	Heath Davenport
Secretary	Stephen Fern
Service Officer	Joyce Damon
Recruiting / Villages	Tony Alger
Recruiting / Ocala	Tig Blackman
Canopy Editor	Ron Dahlgren

Upcoming Events and Historical Notes

All Month	All American Week registration	http://82.sw.gy/aaw
March 8th, 1300 hrs	March Chapter Meeting	VFW Post 8083
March 17th, 1500 hrs	St. Patrick's Day Parade	Spanish Springs, The Villages
March 29th	Vietnam War Veterans Day	Nationwide
April 12th, 1200 hrs	Annual Airborne Picnic	Location TBD
May 10th	C-47 Water Jump	Lake Dora, Wooten Park
May 19th-22nd	All American Week 2025	Fort Bragg, NC

From the Editor



This month's cover image is from Lt. Col. John Hall of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. It was taken on January 24th, 2018, at Juliet Drop Zone in northern Italy.

I'm very pleased to include my interview with Andrew Bragg in this issue. Andrew has done something very difficult in putting together his book and it's a real gem.

I want to send a heartfelt thank you to our new chapter secretary, Stephen Fern. The minutes he produces are detailed, informative, and beautifully formatted. Thank you, Stephen!

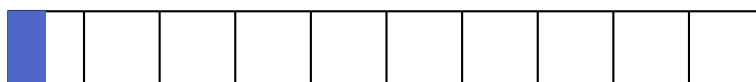
Airborne! All The Way!

Ron Dahlgren

Editor, The Canopy

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

Our 2025 Booster Goal is \$500



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50%

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Chairman's Message

Happy St. Patrick's Day! If you haven't heard, the St. Patrick's Day Parade is March 17 (Monday) at 3 p.m. at Spanish Springs in The Villages. Come early since parking will be hectic. Paul McDermott and I took his "Jeep" and we represented the Airborne community in 2016. Since then our chapter has had as many as eight golf carts but we average about six at the parades. Many of our Chapter members have participated over the years and they have really enjoyed the festivities. Come out and support our troopers if you don't want to participate and wear your vest, you just might recruit someone for our chapter! Make it a day out at Spanish Springs Square, take the wife to lunch while you're there. I promise it will be fun! I'll miss my big overgrown, super friendly leprechaun Fran Dolan saying, "May you live to be a hundred years, with one extra year to repent." He loved driving his golf cart in the Parade.

March 29, 2025 marks the 9th Annual National Vietnam War Veterans Day. President Trump officially designated March 29, 2017 as the day to observe this holiday. To be fair all the Presidents from Nixon to Obama have signed proclamations to celebrate the Vietnam War Veterans Day since 1974. There will be many celebrations in our local areas so wear your Airborne vest and show your pride. I attended a welcome home celebration at American Legion Post 347 in Lady Lake recently. There were over 400 in attendance. Major General Edward Chrystal Jr., Director of the Vietnam War Commemoration was there to present pins and commemorations to those that served in our armed forces from Nov 1, 1955 to May 15, 1975. Over 3 million served in Vietnam almost 10 percent of our generation's population. 1500 are still listed as missing. We also have to recognize the over 7,000 women who served in Vietnam. We'll be here to welcome you home brothers and sisters.

Also it's never too early to start planning for our annual Airborne Picnic in April 12. More to follow.

Please be ready to discuss the May 10 meeting (Last one before our summer hiatus). A few of us are making a water jump out of a C-47 at Lake Dora (Tavares side) on that day so I thought I'd bring a motion to have our last meeting at Wooten Park at Lake Dora. We could car pool, pack a lunch, bring coolers etc. There will be lots of Paratrooper from all over Florida there. Please think about it.

Hopefully I'll see you on the manifest for March's meeting. Stand in the door!

Airborne!

Tony Alger

Chairman

North Central Florida All-Airborne Chapter



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Arthur Tate

Interview with Andrew Bragg

January 24th



View from the top of Baba Shaba Ghar Mountain, SGT Aaron Teutsch from HHC 2-508 looks out to the village Photo by TSgt Christine Jones, 22nd MPAD

I first had the good fortune of speaking with Andrew Bragg on Saturday, January 4th, 2025. Will Yeske, author of *Damn the Valley*, had clued me into the recently-released book from Andrew. On that Saturday call, we talked about our time in the 82nd Airborne, about the 82nd Airborne Division Association, and general veteran stuff. I pointed out his book on my shelf and said I'd like to interview him about it sometime. I had not yet started the book and Andrew asked me to please read the book before we talked next. I was in for an experience.

The Book

The Devil's Playground was written by Andrew Bragg and published by Casemate in 2024. I picked up a hard cover edition directly from the publisher. It comes in at 261 pages and focuses on one thing - the experience of 2nd Platoon, Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment in the Arghandab River Valley in late 2009 to 2010.

If you've read many military memoir books over the years, you may be used to a certain formula. The standard form focuses on the author, they go through boot camp, airborne school (BUDS if it's a SEAL memoir), pre-deployment training, a deployment, and then some coda after redeploying. *The Devil's Playground* does not follow that formula. The text grabs you right away. This is not a happy story. It is a tragedy. As a char-

acter says early on, "buckle up".

The writing is excellent. The author uses foreshadowing, rich detail, and perspectives from several of the people involved to weave an engrossing story. Foreshadowing is used effectively to build a sense of dread from clues that are there to pick up through the text.

The writing of *The Devil's Playground* is rich in detail. There are small things that bring you into a scene, or help to capture the author's perspective, or ground the experience. Some of these details serve to capture the horror of the situation. Others connect to the natural beauty on display at times in the orchards. Andrew's aim was to make the reader feel like one of 2-Charlie, not just a fly on the wall. There is a scene early on of a memorial ceremony. I challenge anyone who has lived through this to read through the chapter without being brought back to that moment. The detail isn't just limited to actual descriptions - the choice of events to recount and aspects to describe brings in a unique perspective.

As a conventional unit, 2-Charlie experiences combat in ways familiar to those of us with conventional combat deployments. Where other units might take a helicopter onto the "X", hit a target, and fly a helicopter back to base an hour later, the convention unit experience is long. The book captures that challenging period *after* the action. When the adrenaline has come and gone and the troops are doing everything they can to stay awake on

security. They get stuck waiting on EOD support for hours and hours. They have to live in a combat outpost for months and months.

A sense of humor, often dark humor, is present throughout the book. The book is written by an enlisted paratrooper - an E-5 at the time of the events - and that attitude comes through. Oftentimes humor is the only way to handle the equal parts absurdity and tragedy of the experience in Afghanistan. The guys rib each other. They talk shit to each other. But most of all, there is loyalty.

As I read through *The Devil's Playground*, I found myself brought back to my own experiences twenty years ago.

The Reader

Andrew told me his desire was to bring the experiences of 2-Charlie to the reader. To really share it. To bring them there, to the valley, to the unease and dread, to the tensions with the partner force, to the sense of abandonment, to the tragedy of it all. I found myself reminded of events from my deployments twenty years back that hadn't crossed my mind since. I had a similar experience when reading Will Yeske's *Damn the Valley* - little memories would come back to me.

I read through this book from page one to page 261 without skipping ahead. I saved the photos in the middle for after I finished the book. Reading it this way pulled me into the story in a way that's hard to describe. When the platoon lost someone, I felt it. Through the chapters of mundane life around the COP, the people became familiar to me. As a true story of lived experience, there is no greater plot device to the losses. They are just gone, unexpectedly. The use of IEDs in particular creates a sense of meaningless doom.

Veterans of the Global War on Terror will find themselves pulled back in - remembering things that may have been lost. Some of those memories might be tough. That's intentional. Andrew included things that can help those who haven't lived through it better understand the context. As one example, Andrew says, "that's not, like, the sexy war story that readers want to hear, you know, like, pulling security on their own, waiting on EOD to come to you, you know? But it's part of the job, though." Waiting for EOD, locating sensitive items after enemy contact, endless follow-on missions, bizarre rules of engagement, an unpredictable partner force. These all serve to provide the context in which the Global War on Terror trooper operated in Afghanistan.

If an event was impactful for Andrew, it's bought into the book in a way that puts the reader in the same state. He pursues his intention of bringing the reader into the situation.



Photo by SGT Stephen Decatur, 4th BCT 82nd ABN DIV. // Troops of 2-508 handling resupply in the valley

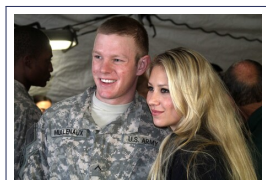


Photo by SGT Stephen Decatur, 4th BCT 82nd ABN DIV. // Anna Kournikova visits 2-508 with USO

The Author

Andrew and I met again on Friday, January 24th to discuss the book and his experiences in detail. Andrew is easy to talk to. As an 82nd vet from just a couple of years after me, we connected quickly. The experience of the Arghandab Valley has shaped him in ways. During our hour and a half conversation, a few themes struck me. First, he is loyal to the men that served alongside him with 2-Charlie and protective of the Gold Star families they left behind. That loyalty also leads to trust. A deep trust for those that were around him. As a flip-side to that, he experienced a lot of frustration and confusion at the actions of the Big Army - those above and around him. The last thing I noticed is a distrust of easy things. A suspicion at anything good. Read the book, you'll understand completely.

The 2009-2010 deployment of 2-508th to the Arghandab was a hard deployment. Andrew's platoon lost several men and had more wounded during their time in country. There was often a gap between the reality on the ground and the idea of higher headquarters as they passed commands down to 2-Charlie. Operating at the squad level was a new thing for the men of C 2-508; initially the unit was slotted to deploy to Iraq. The training for Iraq was focused on urban terrain, clearing buildings, moving effectively in a city. When the unit was reassigned to the Afghanistan deployment, they were left scrambling to get in relevant training ahead of the deployment. The battalion command team that helped train the men up ahead of the deployment were dismissed just one month into the deployment. Their firing brought in a new command team. In a telling sign, Andrew could not even remember the name of the new battalion commander and command sergeant major that replaced LTC Jenio and CSM Puckett.

Several times in our conversation, Andrew talked about his duty to his men. He was a team leader and always the point man on their patrols. In the chaos of the Valley, one thing he could control was the route his patrols would take. Andrew took this responsibility seriously and would try any way possible to avoid taking the same route twice - including climbing walls, going through irrigation ditches, through holes in the wall. A gateway or a nice bridge was an obvious place for a trap. To do everything possible to keep his guys safe, he would find that unique path for the next patrol. He described looking on the map at the maze of dirt walls and colored routes that other squads had taken and trying to find a new way. "I'm going to go through this wall. I'm going to hop over." They were solving a maze over and over and requiring a different solution each time.

Surviving his time in the valley has left Andrew with a strong sense of superstition. There is luck, there are patterns, there are traps out there. His worldview is colored by those months doing what he could to avoid being blown up and having several close calls despite those efforts.

While working on the book, Andrew worked to find the pre-deployment dress uniform photos of the men that were killed in action. This proved more difficult than expected with the unit public affairs officers being unable to locate the pictures. Eventually, he had to reach out to the Gold Star families for the photos. Ironically, when he later returned to Ft. Bragg, the photos were



Photo by SSG Jeremy Crisp, XVIII ABN CORPS PAO. // A heartfelt goodbye from a 2-508 trooper as he leaves for the Afghanistan deployment

just down the hallway from the office he was checking with.

Andrew drove around the country meeting with other 2-Charlie veterans from that deployment to interview them. He was living out of his truck at the time, untethered to any place in particular. This allowed him to take the time to find his platoon again, all these years later. Those memories and perspectives were used to get the larger picture for the book - something more than just Andrew's point of view. The process of reaching out to the other guys reconnected them in a meaningful way. Some of them were struggling since their time in the Valley. Reconnecting helped them get back on track and helped them realize they were not alone.

Both during and after the 2009-2010 deployment to the Arghandab River Valley, Andrew had to deal with a lot of emotions. The experiences of losing friends, gaining and then losing other connections, seeing safety and then having it ruined, these all played on his emotions. For Andrew and the men around him, these feelings had to be bottled up and dealt with later - often alone. In talking about his experience writing the book, I can tell he has run into some of those same feelings as he relived the experiences. He would work on the book in public libraries as he was traveling around the country to reconnect with the guys and sometimes had a hard time keeping it together while work-

ing there. Imagine rehashing some of these traumatic events in detail but doing it in a quiet public library. The theme of fighting against emotions comes up repeatedly in the book, in our conversation, and I suspect in his life.

Like many of us with stereo 82nd Airborne Division patches, reintegration was not easy. After leaving the service, Andrew had difficulty managing some personal relationships and took a while to find his way. Part of that process was writing this book.

During our conversation, Andrew repeatedly highlighted that the book was not *his* story, but the story of 2-Charlie. He tries to move the spotlight off himself and onto the platoon. He insists he is not the star but a character in the story. Although a noble goal, Andrew deserves significant praise for this book. It's something special. It hits hard. It captures the minutia and the big events. He dug deep into his experiences and laid out some very tough emotions.

I can't recommend it enough. Whether you fought in Afghanistan as part of the Global War on Terror or not, you need to read this book.

Author's Note: Andrew and I spoke before Ft. Liberty was announced to revert to Ft. Bragg. At the conclusion of our interview, Andrew joked that he hoped his book did well enough that they would name the base after him - his wish came true!



Troops from D Co, 2-508th in the Arghandab.

Photo by SGT Stephen Decatur, 4th BCT 82nd ABN DIV

From The Chapter

January 24th



National Director Ron Dahlgren swears in Secretary Stephen Fern.

Photo by Gary Blasczienski

The Chapter assembled Saturday, February 8th at 1300 hours. There were 15 members, 1 spouse, and 4 guests present for a total headcount of 20 attendees. At this meeting, our new Secretary, Stephen Fern, was officially sworn in by National Director Ron Dahlgren. The Phantom Airborne Brigade water jump was again discussed. There are 80 jumpers manifested for May the 10th. More information about the jump and the Phantom Airborne Brigade can be found at <https://phantomairborne.org>

With All American Week approaching, the chapter discussed the need to send a delegate. Stephen Fern, newly-minted secretary, was nominated and approved to serve as the delegate.

February is designated as Black History Month and the chapter was treated to a presentation from Vietnam-era black aviator



Photo by Gary Blasczienski.

Dr. Joe Ponds. Dr. Ponds is the chaplain and president of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association of Florida.

At the end of the meeting, a VFW member, John Slimm of Slimm Construction, joined the lunch and donated an 82nd Airborne Division commemorative bottle of bourbon to the chapter. The bourbon was from Boundary Oak Distillery.

Presentation Dr. Joe Ponds

The chapter had guest speaker, Dr. Joe Ponds, for our February meeting. Dr. Ponds is a gifted speaker and kept the members engaged throughout. He has written a book titled, "600 M.O.L. - Black Helicopter Pilots in Vietnam" and recently released a second edition. The "M.O.L." in the title is short for "more or less". Dr. Ponds told the chapter there were 600 black helicopter pilots in Vietnam, more or less.

Dr. Ponds described the three missions of aviators in Vietnam. There were the UH-1 Iroquois known as "slicks", the AH-1G Cobra, known as "guns", and the medevac helicopters, known as "heroes". Dr. Joe described several strategies employed in Vietnam. In one example, a helicopter would fly very low to the ground searching for enemy positions. The enemy was very good at camouflage and could not be spotted from a great distance. When enemy activity was spotted, the low-flying helicopter would mark the position and get out of there while gunships flying along out of sight would move in to position and take care of business.

After riveting descriptions of being an aviator in Vietnam, Dr. Ponds took us back to the Tuskegee Airman of World War II. He acknowledged the trailblazing of this initial group and recalled tails of forces in World War II requesting, "the red tails" - a shorthand for the 332nd Fighter Group piloted by Tuskegee graduates.



Photo by R. Dahlgren.



Photo by R. Dahlgren.

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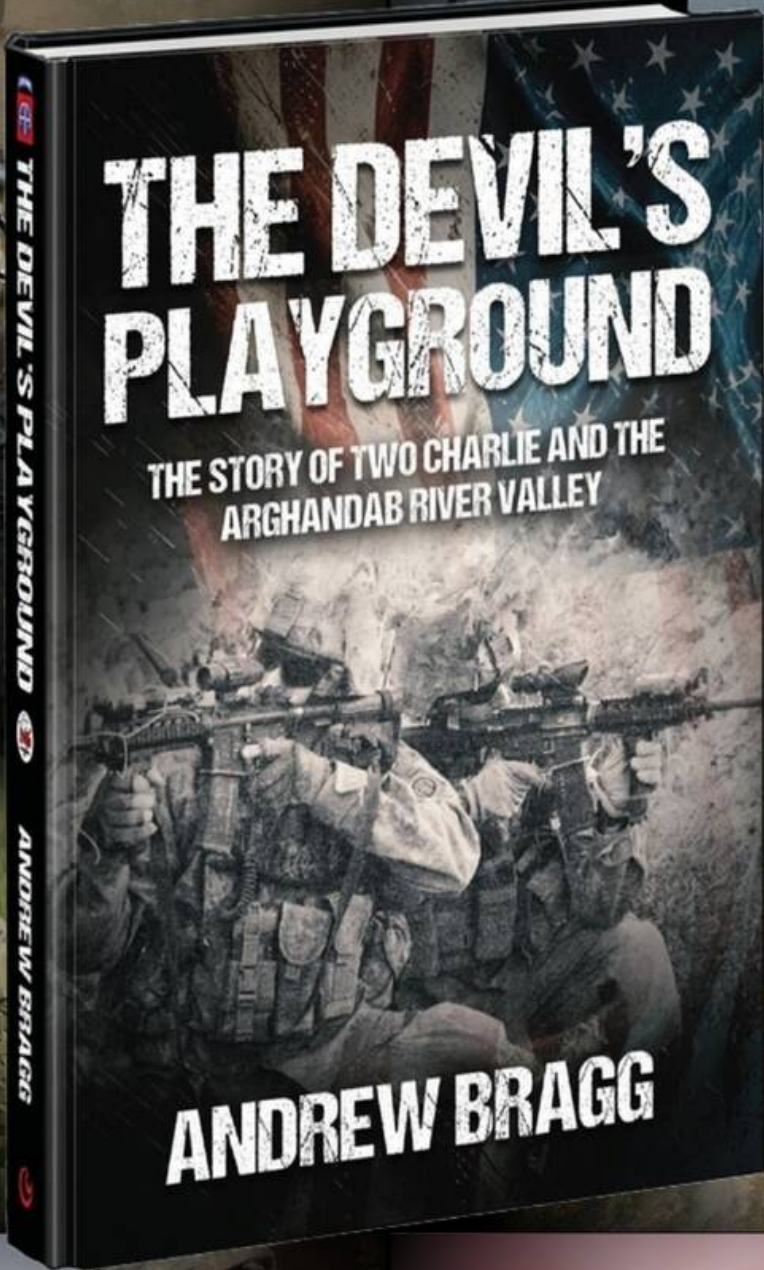
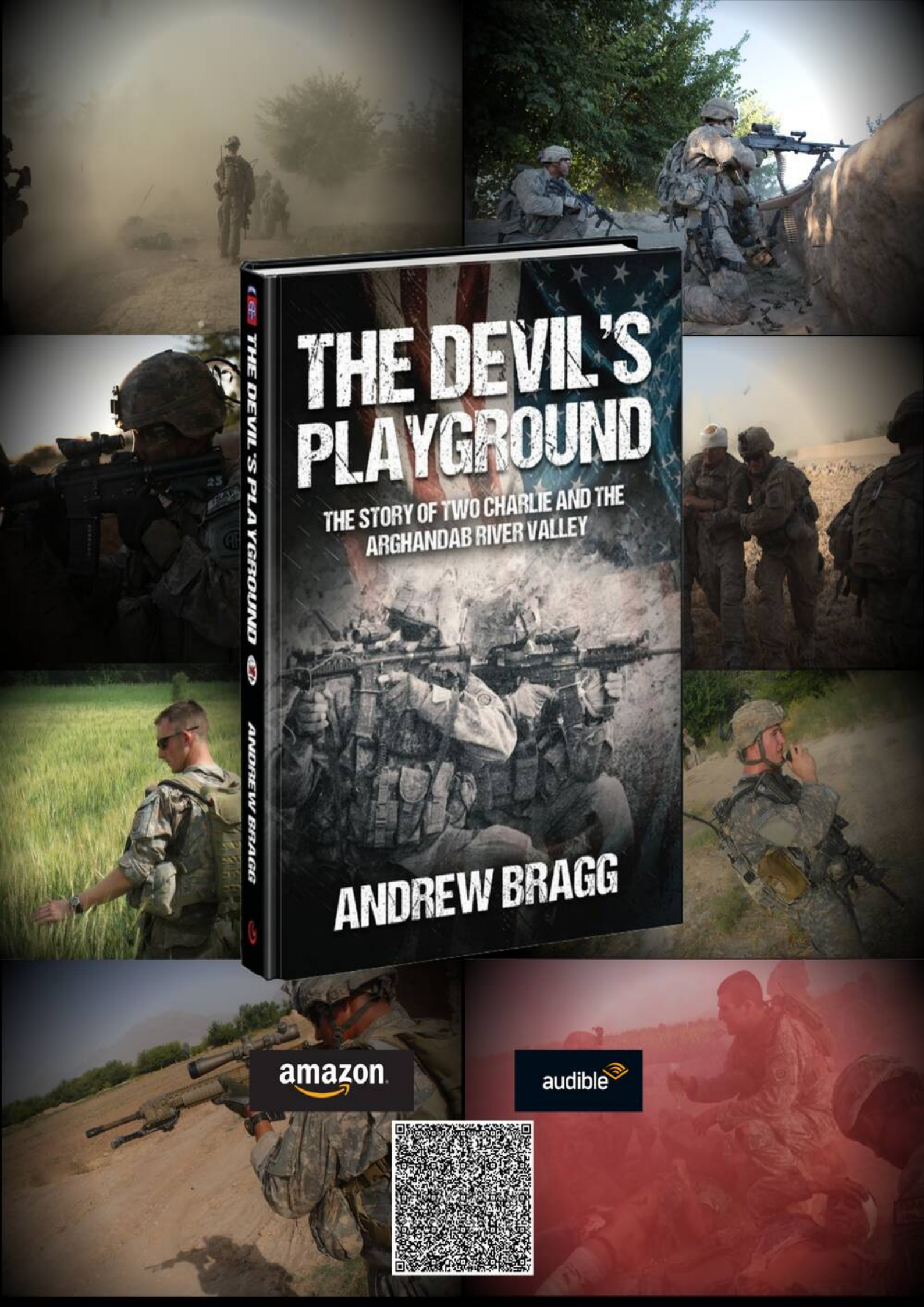


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