
THE SETTLEMENT

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RESIST

Battle for the Bluff

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Revised edition published 2025

First published 2024

by BC Publications

ISBN 978-1-0670681-0-3 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-0670681-1-0 (EPub)

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COPYPRESS

Printed by CopyPress, Nelson, New Zealand.

{REALNZBOOKS}

Distributed by Real NZ Books, Nelson, New Zealand.

To Buster

GLOSSARY

ASAP	As Soon As Possible
EMP	Electro Magnetic Pulse
ET	Entrenching Tool: a type of collapsable shovel
FOB	Forward Operational Base
GLA	Grenade Launching Attachment
IAs	Immediate Actions
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
LUP	Lay Up Point
MARS-L™	Modular Assault Rifle System – Light
NAVEX	NAVigational EXercise
OP	Observation Post
Psy-Op	Psychological Operation
RatPacks	Ration packs
SASR	Special Air Service Regiment based in Perth, Australia
SITREP	SITuation REPort
SMEAC	Situation, Mission, Execution, Admin, and Communication.
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
WILCO	Will Comply

PROLOGUE

The Black Hawk came in on a steep bank, giving its occupants a brief view of the sprawling Bagram airbase spread out below them. To avoid enemy fire, the pilot brought it down as quickly as possible and flared at the last moment to land gently under the guidance of the crewman leaning out the open door. The two Apache helicopters that had escorted them in, peeled off to land in their own respective spots and a military ambulance and two six-wheeled Land Rovers with small Australian Flags painted on them, pulled up just beyond the blades as the pilots went through their shut down procedures.

A couple of medics jumped out of the ambulance and ran to the cabin where the four soldiers had already disembarked, dumping their packs on the ground and carrying a fifth man on a stretcher. The leader, who was holding an IV bag, thrust it at the medic and they moved at pace to load the injured man in the back of the ambulance. The medic climbed in the back and instructed the others to follow in the vehicles behind.

“Like fuck that’s happening,” the leader said with a strong Australian accent. “That’s my man, and I’m going with him.” His tone was steel-edged and brooked no argument. The medic nodded, and he climbed in with the injured man. The leader called back to the others, “See you back at the Operation Room.”

They acknowledged the order and went to jog back to the chopper to pick up the packs, but discovered they’d already been loaded into the vehicles by the two drivers.

The ambulance pulled away and the medic started recording the vital signs of the injured man, but his eyes kept being drawn back to the leader. His hair was below his shoulders; his face weathered from being exposed to the elements. His beard was long and unkempt, clothes well-

worn and bloodstained; but his rifle was immaculate. He was watching his comrade with icy blue eyes and a level of detachment that told the medic this was a hardened and seasoned soldier. The only people that looked like that were Special Forces, and with his Australian accent, he assumed the man must be a member of the Special Air Service Regiment from Perth.

An hour later, the leader arrived back at the Australian camp and headed into the Ops room where the Officer Commanding, Major Little, was waiting. The other three men from the patrol were also with him, awaiting news of their injured friend.

“Brad, how’re you doing?” the OC asked.

“Bit rough, Boss. But such is life,” Brad responded tiredly and looked at the others, “Kiwi didn’t make it.”

Profanities filled the room, and one of the men walked over and punched a wall with a loud crack. Once the initial outburst died down, there was just empty, awful silence.

“You want to put off the debrief until after you’ve cleaned up?” Little asked, reading the room.

Brad just shook his head and gritted his teeth. “May as well get it over with.”

They relayed their post-mission report to Little for the next hour, including details of the contact from each person’s angle, and how Kiwi got shot. Once they’d finished, the OC wrapped it up and dismissed them, but as Brad went to leave, Little stopped him.

“Sorry mate, but I have to ask... you put in for a discharge at the end of this tour, but before I sign off on it, I need to be sure there’s nothing we can do to keep you in.”

Brad had served in so many hell-holes, he’d lost track of how many tours he been on. He shook his head, looking solemnly at the younger, but senior-ranked, man.

“I’ve lost too many mates already, Boss. And I think twenty-one years is enough time served.”

“We could offer you a commission?” Little said, dangling the offer of a promotion to officer as an enticement to stay, but Brad just stifled a laugh.

“An O? No offence Boss, but no fucking way. Why do you think I kept knocking back promotions? The higher you get, the more paperwork you do, that’s not my thing,” he said with a tired smile.

“Okay, I’ll sign it and send it off this afternoon. I take it you’re going to have a drink with the boys?” Little asked, knowing the tradition where each man put money behind the bar so if they were killed, they’d do the last shout. This would be Kiwi’s farewell, and Brad needed to be there.

Brad nodded his head. “Boys are probably already on it, so I’ll get cleaned up and join them.”

Turning, he went to say goodbye to Kiwi.

The next three months went by in a blur for Brad. On his last day he handed in all his issued kit and walked out of the barracks at Swanbourne as a civilian. Part of him was sad to leave such a big part of his life behind, but he also felt like he’d been given a breath of fresh air.

During the three months leading up to his discharge, he had used up all his leave, visiting places he’d always wanted to see. On his trip around New Zealand, he’d taken a wrong turn while driving up the West Coast and ended up in a small village tucked up against a towering limestone bluff. Getting out of his rental car, he had taken in the surroundings, the lush vegetation, the roaring of distant surf and the call of native birds. He’d felt a warmth creep into his soul and had instantly fallen in love with the place. He had come home.

CHAPTER 1

Brad walked back to his house carrying his rifle and a freshly killed deer slung over his shoulders. He was not happy that it had taken two shots to put the hind down because ammo was getting low. Most gun stores had been ransacked within the first few days of the nukes going off but luckily, he had been stockpiling as he'd had a feeling that things were going to go pear-shaped.

He turned up his driveway and headed to the shed hidden amongst a small stand of native scrub at the back of his property. After shrugging off the hind, he entered the shed, turned on the light switch and went to check the battery charge levels for the solar set up. He grunted with approval on seeing they were fully charged, unloaded his rifle, and started the methodical routine of cleaning it. After removing the bolt, he started to clean the rifling of built-up carbon. His time in the military had put him in good stead for these uncertain times. After cleaning his rifle, he replaced the bolt and reloaded the magazine. He worked the action of the bolt, chambered a round, engaged the safety and removing the magazine, added another round into it. He systematically slotted the magazine back in place with a click and rested the weapon on the bench.

Stepping outside into the crisp spring air, he dragged the hind into the shed and manhandled the animal onto the pulley system he'd set up in the middle. With a small grunt of effort, he winched it up until the carcass was hanging off the floor and after sharpening his knife, he proceeded to carefully skin the deer. Every part of it would be used, like they did prior to the industrial revolution. In this changed world, nothing was wasted.

“Brad, you in there?” a voice boomed out.

Brad wiped his knife and smiled at the familiar voice.

“In here, Davo.”

When Davo opened the door, his huge silhouette blocked the light. Where Brad was five foot, nine inches tall and lean, Davo was an impressive six foot nine, barrel chested, with biceps thicker than Brad’s thighs and solid pistons for legs.

“Thought I saw you staggering down the road. You know it’d be easier if you just learned to ride a horse,” Davo quipped with a deep rolling laugh.

Brad raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you remember when you tried to teach me? I’m *still* having flashbacks,” he countered with a laugh, referring to the time Davo tried to teach him. The horse had bucked him off sending him right into a large pile of cow shit and Davo hadn’t stopped laughing for at least ten minutes.

“You have to harden up princess,” Davo replied with another booming laugh.

He walked over to the skinned deer and gave it a slap. “Nice kill, bit of fat on it too.”

“Yeah, I’ll bone it tomorrow and divvy out the meat to the others who need it. You need any?” Brad asked.

“Nah, all good mate. I don’t have young ones like the Taylors, so give it to them.”

“So, what’s the real reason you’re here?” Brad asked. “It’s not like you not to give a man a breather after a hunt.”

“There’s been a development south,” Davo replied solemnly.

Brad’s eyes narrowed. “Sounds like the sort of news that goes down better with a beer. Let’s head to the house and I’ll crack open a couple.” He picked up his rifle and, leaving the shed with Davo in tow, strolled back towards his house.

In the kitchen he placed his rifle in the gun rack and went to the pantry. Pulling out two mason jars of amber liquid, he handed one to

Davo and motioned for him to sit at the kitchen table. Though he said 'beers,' the liquid was Brad's latest experiment in making mead from honey.

Davo unscrewed the lid, took a deep appreciative sniff and a sip.

"God-damn this is good," he said leaning back and making the wooden chair creak under the pressure of his massive frame. Davo closed his eyes and savoured the taste. "This gets better every time you make it."

"Right, what's so urgent that couldn't wait?" Brad asked, cutting to the chase.

Davo leant forward, stroked his beard, and took a deep breath.

"Scavengers have hit Greymouth and looks like they're coming north." He looked directly at Brad, then paused to take another sip from his jar. "They're hitting all the survivor settlements, raping, pillaging, plundering and then killing anyone still alive not wanting to join them. The locals are nervous about them coming here and want to hold a town meeting to work out how to negotiate a deal with them."

Standing up, Brad walked over to the window and silently looked out at the soaring limestone cliffs that formed the settlement's southern border. He took a sip of mead and quietly asked, "What are your thoughts on this?"

Davo joined him at the window and noted the silent tension and turbulence running through his friend; his jaw clenched and eyes staring into the distance.

Lifting the jar to his lips once again, Davo looked out at the same view and offered his thoughts.

"My take? Those bastards need to be taken out. We have a lot of young families here though, so I get where they're coming from. They just want to be safe."

Brad continued to stare into the distance for a bit longer. Finally, he took a breath and asked, "When's the town meeting?"

"Tomorrow, after milking."

"Well, looks like I'm going to be in attendance," Brad murmured.

The next morning, Brad planned his trip to the pub where the town meeting was being held. His home was situated in an area affectionately known to the locals as the ‘Subby’, and was a short distance from the pub, either a five-kilometre walk following the road, or just eight hundred metres as the crow flies if you crossed the three-metre tidal river. At high tide it was a paddle across, at low tide you could walk over without the water going above your knees. Even though it was low tide, Brad decided to use his kayak to paddle across, not knowing how long the meeting would take.

The pub, a low-set 1920’s villa owned by third-generation publican Ben, was a local mainstay for socialising and serious business. Entering the dimly lit interior from beneath the eaves of the wraparound verandah, Brad placed his rifle into the rack. The place was abuzz with discussion and the feeling of low-level anxiety in the room was palpable. Seating himself in a corner, Brad scanned the faces of the people and listened to the chatter without engaging with anyone.

Everyone from the settlement and surrounding areas was there. Brad observed that it was a wide-ranging collection of people from fifth-generation locals, to ‘newbies’ who had only been there a short time before the bombs dropped. Brad was conscious of the fact he fell into the latter category.

Normally the locals shared pleasantries with each other, having candid discussion about events and life in general, however with Brad they were always a bit reserved. They knew of his past life in the military and although they were respectful and cordial, they were also wary of him. While they didn’t know his whole history, they knew he was a war fighter who had arrived in their settlement with a view to retire. He was like a square peg in a round hole in this peaceable community. When the bombs dropped, everyone had seen a dramatic change in him. Gone was the relaxed and easy-going person who had arrived in