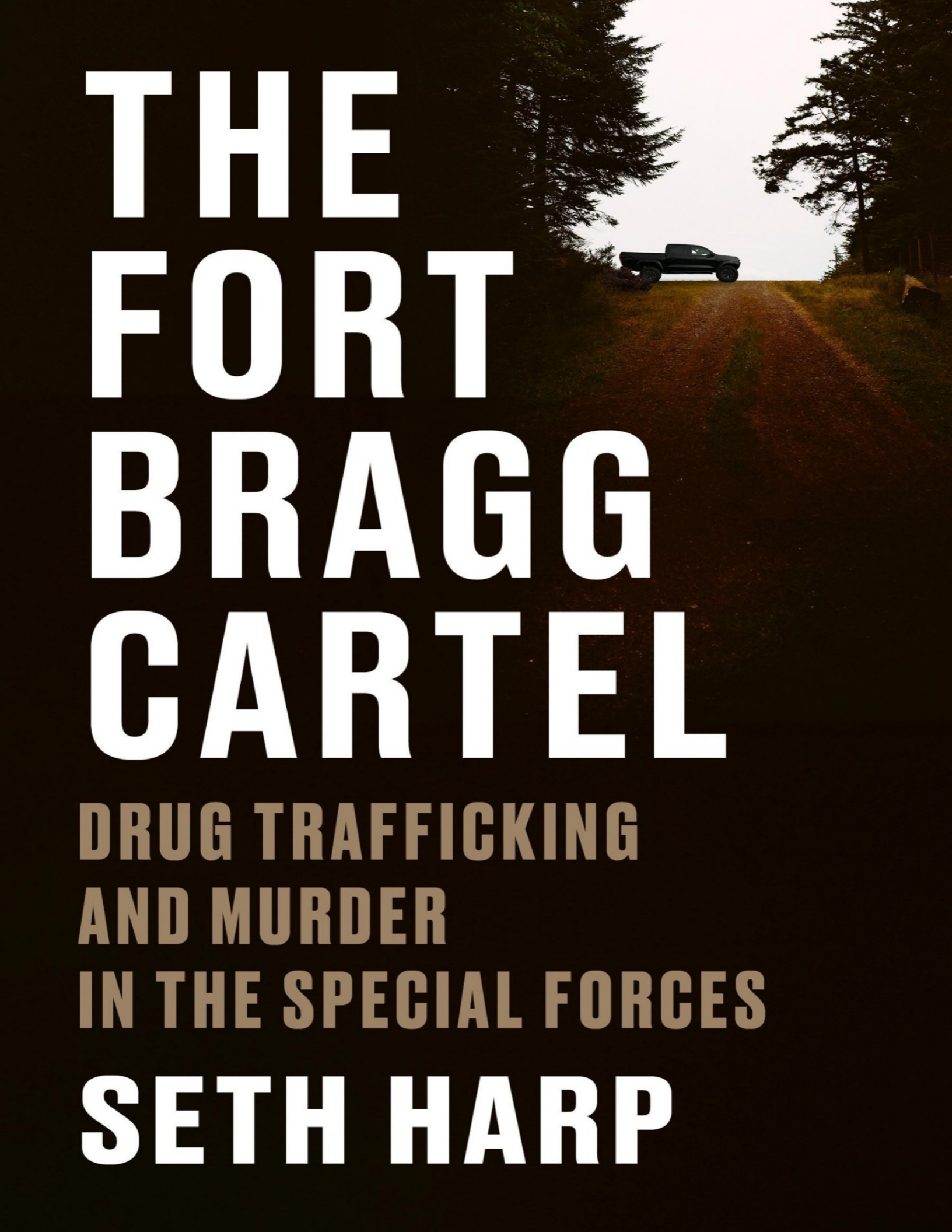


A black pickup truck is parked on a dirt road that leads up a grassy hill. The road is flanked by tall evergreen trees. The sky is overcast. The overall tone is somber and mysterious.

THE FORT BRAGG CARTEL

**DRUG TRAFFICKING
AND MURDER
IN THE SPECIAL FORCES**

SETH HARP

THE FORT BRAGG CARTEL

**DRUG TRAFFICKING AND MURDER
IN THE SPECIAL FORCES**

Seth Harp

Viking

VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © 2025 by Seth Harp

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

VIKING is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to reprint lyrics from “Copperhead Road.” Words and music by Steve Earle. Copyright © 1988 by Cypark Songs (ASCAP), Duke of Earle Music (ASCAP) and Warner-Olive Music LLC (ASCAP). All rights on behalf of Cypark Songs and Duke of Earle Music administered by WC Music Corp. All rights for Warner-Olive Music LLC (ASCAP) administered by Universal Music Corp. (ASCAP). Exclusive worldwide print rights for Warner-Olive Music LLC (ASCAP) administered by Alfred Music. All rights reserved. Used by permission of Alfred Music.

Image credits: [1](#): courtesy of Army HRC; [2](#) and 90: courtesy of Tammy Mabey; [3](#): courtesy of Army HRC; [4](#): by Donnie Roberts for *The Lexington Dispatch*; [5](#): courtesy of Sampson County, NC; [6](#): courtesy of Cumberland County, NC; [7](#): courtesy of FBI Charlotte; [8](#): courtesy of Forsyth County, NC; [9](#): courtesy of Army HRC.

Portions of this work originally appeared, in a different form, in articles published in *Rolling Stone*.

Cover design: Adly Elewa

Cover images: *landscape*, Parker Fitzgerald / Getty Images; *truck*, Phil Stefany

Designed by Amanda Dewey. adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen

Hardcover ISBN 9780593655085

Ebook ISBN 9780593655092

Some names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect people's privacy.

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House
Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, [https://eu-
contact.penguin.ie](https://eu-contact.penguin.ie).

prhid_prh_7.3a_152634369_co_ro

CONTENTS

Dedication

Epigraph

PART I

One I Kill People for a Living

Two They Do What They Want

PART II

Three Fayetteenam

Four Don't Call Me Your Husband

Five Pipe Hitters

Six The Killing Fest

Seven Alleged Mexican White

Eight The Northern Distribution Network

Nine Rise and Kill First

PART III

Ten Cover Girls

Eleven Warehouse 13

PART IV

Twelve He Was Seeing Bad Things

Thirteen You Can't Make This Shit Up

Fourteen That Man Worked for the Cartel

Fifteen Freddie Had Everything Under Control

Sixteen Until Valhalla

Seventeen The Thumb Drive

PART V

Eighteen Acid Is Life

Nineteen Evidence of Absence

Twenty **Roid Rage**

Twenty-One **Withdrawal Symptoms**

Twenty-Two **Permanent War**

Twenty-Three **Fort Liberty**

Twenty-Four **The Third Man**

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Notes

Index

About the Author

For Oscar Medina and Ramon Ojeda

*I done two tours of duty in Vietnam
I came home with a brand-new plan
I take the seed from Colombia and Mexico
I just plant it up a holler down Copperhead Road
And now the DEA's got a chopper in the air
I wake up screamin' like I'm back over there
I learned a thing or two from Charlie, don't you know
You better stay away from Copperhead Road.*

STEVE EARLE, "Copperhead Road"

Part I

One

I KILL PEOPLE FOR A LIVING

Two veteran Special Forces soldiers, still drunk from the night before, their brains fried from a days-long binge on cocaine, MDMA, prescription pills, and a grab bag of mind-altering chemicals commonly sold in smoke shops as “bath salts,” were driving home from Walt Disney World the morning of March 21, 2018, when Sergeant First Class Mark Leshikar, riding in the passenger seat, developed an unshakable conviction that their car was being followed. Leshikar’s hard blue eyes, cracked with bloodshot veins from lack of sleep, studied the side-view mirror. He could have sworn that he saw shadowy pursuers on their tail, flitting in and out of the hazy lanes of traffic behind them on the Dixie Highway.

The driver of the car, Master Sergeant William Lavigne II, a member of the U.S. Army’s top-secret Delta Force who had been trained in evasive driving and countersurveillance, told Leshikar that he was hallucinating. They were northbound on Interstate 95, headed for Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where both men were stationed. Lavigne, the older and more highly ranking of the two, had been keeping a close watch on the rearview mirror for miles. There was no one on their six o’clock, he insisted. But Leshikar wouldn’t listen.

Two little girls, Lavigne’s daughter and Leshikar’s, were in the back of the car, tired and sunburned after days of exploring the theme parks in and around Orlando, Florida. They were too young to understand what the tense

bickering in the front seats was about. All they knew was that their daddies were starting to scare them.

According to Leshikar's mother, sister, and wife, he had been acting strangely for the last six months. The trouble began, they said, in late 2017, as a result of an ambiguous mishap that he sustained while on deployment to Tajikistan, a remote and mountainous narco-state that the United States used for many years as a staging ground for the war in Afghanistan. What exactly happened to Leshikar in Tajikistan, a global hub of international heroin trafficking, is a mystery. An anodyne Pentagon press release states that he and his Green Beret teammates were there to train the Tajik military on standard infantry tactics like target practice, rock drills, and first aid. Everyone in the accompanying photograph looks pretty bored. But upon Leshikar's return to the United States, he didn't seem like the same person. His appearance had changed, too. "When he came home," said his mother, Tammy Mabey, "notably, you could see a droopiness in his eye."

Leshikar told her and his wife, Laura, that he and his team had come under attack in an ambush and that a roadside bomb had rocked the truck he was in, leaving him with a traumatic brain injury. But a spokesman for the United States Army Special Operations Command, known as USASOC, said that no American soldier has ever been killed or wounded in Tajikistan. Nor do Leshikar's personnel records reflect that he was awarded a Purple Heart, a decoration given to soldiers wounded as a result of enemy action.

Whatever the cause of Leshikar's injury, a military doctor had prescribed him tramadol, an opioid painkiller that was freely distributed to elite troops during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and became a popular drug of abuse among special operations soldiers. Leshikar also came back from Tajikistan with a steady supply of the benzodiazepine Xanax, which he took along with tramadol to treat anxiety associated with his supposed PTSD, another claimed effect of the fictitious ambush. On top of this volatile pharmaceutical cocktail, which, in addition to suppressing the central nervous system, can cause bizarre episodes of uninhibited behavior, Leshikar had taken up snorting cocaine. He tried to rationalize it, telling

Tammy that he and his fellow Green Berets regularly used the stuff to stay awake during night operations. “It’s just like taking an antidepressant,” he’d said.

Tammy, a single mother who had worked for a succession of small-town police departments in the Pacific Northwest, first as a jailer and dispatcher, later as a patrolwoman, wasn’t convinced. Cocaine is illegal, not something prescribed by a doctor, she reasoned. But it was her son’s alcohol consumption that concerned her the most. “Marky always acted perfectly fine when doing cocaine,” she said. “When Marky would spiral was if he drank too much.”

In the past, Leshikar had been a proud, stoic, taciturn man, not given to displays of incontinent emotion. Now, after no more than two or three alcoholic beverages, which combined poorly with the medications he was on, a maudlin gloominess would overtake him, a sullen and wounded sort of machismo. He would turn to his wife and say things like “You know I’m a bad person, right? I kill people for a living.”

—

IN A PHOTO TAKEN at an American base in Afghanistan, where he served six months in combat from 2015 to 2016, Leshikar wears wraparound Oakley sunglasses, a thick beard, and a pleased grin while getting pinned with a Bronze Star medal and a Combat Infantry Badge. In other photos, he sports a custom skull patch on the front of his body armor, a Confederate battle flag on his left shoulder, and an oversize belt buckle shaped like a fanged demon with ram’s horns.

“Such a pigheaded, egotistical man,” was the first impression that he made on Laura, a paralegal originally from Hawaii whose dad was a marine. She initially scoffed at his swaggering boastfulness and the ridiculous lies he told. He was rather tall and handsome, though: six feet four, with light blue

eyes and a jawline as well defined as a carpenter's square. "Over time," said Laura, "he grew on me."

Leshikar was born in 1984 in rural Idaho and joined the active-duty Air Force at age eighteen. He served in the Air Force Honor Guard, a ceremonial unit in which he felt left out of the real action entailed in America's escalating wars. In 2010, after an aimless period in civilian employ, he secured a Special Forces slot in Washington state's Army National Guard and was sent to Fort Bragg for Green Beret training.

Assigned to the 19th Special Forces Group, a National Guard formation that has teams of part-time Green Berets stationed all over the country, Leshikar went on to patch together a career as a so-called guard bum, a reservist with no other regular source of employment who jumps from orders to orders, picking up deployments, temporary duty assignments, and paid training gigs as often as possible. He deployed for a year to the Philippines, worked for a time as a SWAT trainer and private security guard, then did his tours in Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

"His deployments were pretty kinetic," said Jordan Terrell, a paratrooper in Fort Bragg's 82nd Airborne Division, originally from Chicago, who was friends with Leshikar. "I know he threw a bunch of incendiary grenades on a villager's hut and burned a couple of people alive," Terrell said. "He showed me videos. It was pretty fucked up."

Shortly after returning from Tajikistan in 2017, Leshikar suffered a severe clonic-tonic seizure, resulting in his hospitalization. A computed tomography scan of his brain, as well as magnetic resonance imaging, failed to disclose any physical trauma. There was no clear etiology for the seizure, but the doctor who examined him surmised that it had something to do with his heavy use of prescription drugs, as well as chronic insomnia.

In February 2018, about a month before the ill-fated trip to Disney World, Leshikar's little sister Nicole Rick and her husband, a Navy submariner, stayed with Mark and Laura for two weeks while closing on a house in Chesapeake, Virginia. Whenever a babysitter could be found to look after their children, the group of four young parents, all in their mid-thirties,

went out on the town together, invariably joined by Leshikar's best friend, Billy Lavigne, the Delta Force soldier. "Full disclosure," Nicole said, "me and Billy and Mark all did coke together."

Before hitting a bar or club, they would stop at Lavigne's house, a cookie-cutter tract home at the end of a cul-de-sac in a newly constructed subdivision of Fayetteville, the moody military town, a low-slung sprawl of suburbs and strip malls, studded with billboards, that surrounds Fort Bragg on three sides. Lavigne had recently divorced, and now that his wife and daughter had moved out, the three-bedroom house was often full of his fellow operators from Delta Force, a highly classified unit a cut above the ordinary Special Forces.

No less secretive than the Central Intelligence Agency, Delta Force exists to carry out covert actions, defined under federal law as overseas operations "in which it is intended that the role of the United States government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly." Wearing civilian clothes or operating in disguise under false identities, soldiers from Delta Force infiltrate foreign countries and commit clandestine acts of sabotage, espionage, and assassination, often on direct orders from the White House. Behind a heavy curtain of government secrecy, twenty-plus years at war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Syria, the Philippines, and elsewhere has given rise in this ultra-elite unit to a toxic culture of addiction, criminality, madness, violence, and impunity.

"The unit guys kind of separate themselves into two groups," said Terrell, who, like Leshikar, aspired to join Delta Force but failed to meet the rigorous and often arbitrary selection criteria. "You have the teetotalers, the guys who are super Christian, warriors for God. No drugs, no alcohol, super goody-goody, by the book. Then you have the guys who are just complete fucking derelicts, constantly doing nefarious shit."

Lavigne definitely belonged to the latter category, as did his buddies who congregated at his house. Laura and Nicole described his core group of friends from the unit as half a dozen tall white men, grizzled and bearded and heavily tattooed, ranging in age from their late twenties to early forties.

In between shots of liquor and lines of cocaine, they joked about the operations they had been on and boasted of their exploits in combat, indefatigable in their attempts to one-up each other. “You got 42 confirmed kills?” said Laura, imitating a man’s deep voice. “Well, I got 120.”

Laura, Nicole, and Terrell, who himself sold marijuana and psilocybin mushrooms on Fort Bragg, all attested to the flagrant and continuous use of cocaine as well as MDMA and other drugs by a regular procession of active-duty Delta Force operators at Billy Lavigne’s residence. “They’ve done coke in front of me,” said Laura. “Other operators that were there. Sometimes when I would walk into Billy’s house, it was just everywhere.”

Lavigne was the one who dealt the cocaine. He collected the cash, went off someplace to meet with somebody, and when he came back, doled out the coke to those who partook. “Billy coordinated it,” said Nicole. “All the money that was pulled together was given to Billy.”

“Drugs are just the culture there,” Terrell said of Delta Force. “Everybody knows it, everybody is complicit in it, and nobody does anything about it.”

—

BILLY LAVIGNE was born in 1983 in Gladstone, Michigan, a small town on the shores of the Green Bay that’s more northerly in latitude than Ottawa or Quebec. His father was a tire salesman and his mother worked in a nursing home. In February 2001, he enlisted in the active-duty Army cavalry, not out of any surfeit of patriotic fervor but to get free corrective eye surgery, a little-known perk of military service. Then the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, happened, touching off the longest period of war in American history. “He fell in love with what he was doing,” said his father, William Lavigne Sr., “and decided to make a career out of it.”

Lavigne did an early tour in Iraq as a cavalry scout, then got taken up the pipeline of the 1st Special Forces Group. He made it past the Delta Force

selection board in 2009, at a time when the unit, despite its virtual invisibility to the American public, was emerging as the dominant force in the United States' burgeoning special operations complex, waging a ruthless manhunting and assassination campaign in Iraq and Afghanistan, and across the whole Islamic world, from the snowy passes of the Hindu Kush to the desert scrublands of Somalia, often in partnership with the CIA. By the age of thirty-four, Lavigne had spent a total of forty-one months and twenty-two days in combat. "Pretty much anywhere the U.S. had anything going on between 2006 and 2018," said his dad, "he was there."

Trained in the recondite methods of targeted killing by expert Israeli assassins, Lavigne had most recently deployed in support of the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, where he had most likely belonged to a secret "expeditionary targeting force" dedicated to liquidating the ranks of ISIS commanders in covert hit jobs carried out under cover of night, often in denied areas deep behind enemy lines. Unlike Leshikar, who had a propensity to exaggerate his inner turmoil and psychological darkness for dramatic effect, Lavigne really did kill people for a living.

In his official military portrait, in which he is attired in a blue dress uniform replete with rows of multicolored campaign ribbons, the red arrowhead of USASOC on his breast pocket, and the glittering regalia of a master free-fall parachutist, Lavigne's buzzed head looks like a big white egg, and his ashen face has the pale and drawn appearance of a man who has just shorn off a beard and shaved to the skin. "It's a horrible photo," said Nicole. "Like he's already dead." In real life, Lavigne wasn't bad-looking: tall and bald, with blue eyes and neatly trimmed facial hair. "Him and my brother had similar features," she said.

Lavigne initially made a positive impression on Nicole, a spiritual life coach and Reiki energy healer keenly attuned to the auras that people exude. "Billy was the oddity amongst the Special Forces guys that I was introduced to," she said. "I'm tenderhearted. I would rather see peace than war. He seemed to have ideals that matched mine."

Nicole's tough-talking brother, who'd seen far less combat than Lavigne, was of the opinion that the United States ought to simply nuke the Middle East and be done with it. Lavigne, whose demeanor she describes as "thoughtful" and "introverted," as well as "depressed," disagreed with those belligerent sentiments, speaking up in favor of peace and tolerance toward Muslim countries. "They have a different society," she recalled him saying, "and while I don't agree with it, we shouldn't be doing what we're doing over there."

Ben Boden, Lavigne's best friend from high school, saw his views on the post-9/11 wars evolve over the years. "During the 2005 to 2011 time frame," said Boden, "he was all about kicking ass and taking names." Later, "he was questioning what they were really accomplishing," and "wasn't as gung ho."

To Nicole, Lavigne seemed weighed down by "sadness or guilt," partly on account of his recent divorce, but mostly because he was "tormented by elements of his job." A "soulless" look would come over him, she said, "almost like he was looking through you, as he was talking about the things he had inflicted."

One night at his house, Lavigne confessed to Nicole that he had once shot and killed a child. "He was just a little boy," he told her, "but he had a gun." He also introduced her to his dog, a tautly poised, hyperalert Belgian Malinois named Rocky that had been one of the unit's working animals. Nicole wanted to know why it had no teeth. Lavigne told her that its titanium dentures had been surgically removed upon retirement because the dog had been trained to attack and had grown accustomed to feeding on the flesh of people killed in special operations raids, including being allowed, "as a treat," to eat human brains. "Oh my God," said Nicole, watching the dog gulp down its supper of wet mush. "That's disgusting."

Like many other Delta Force operators, Lavigne had been prescribed dextroamphetamine early in his career to help him cope with sleep deprivation. Legal meds given to him by an Army doctor were what originally engendered his taste for the clean, cold rush of euphoric

confidence that stimulants trigger in the brain. By the early 2010s, he had begun using cocaine. By 2018, he was smoking crack on a daily basis and regularly ingested MDMA, smoked crystal methamphetamine, snorted powdered heroin, and had even taken to inserting speedballs—a dangerous mixture of heroin and cocaine—into his rectum in a dissolvable capsule to get a quicker and more powerful high. “It was out of control,” said Laura, who resented how much time her increasingly addled and erratic husband spent with Lavigne. “Every time I saw Billy, he was strung out on something.”



William J. Lavigne II in official dress uniform, December 2018.

—

ON THE NIGHT of February 26, 2018, after his wife's thirty-sixth birthday party at a bar called Paddy's Irish Pub, Mark Leshikar got so drunk that he nearly threw Nicole off the balcony of an apartment complex in a fit of irrational