

THE NEW MINISTRY OF TRUTH

**Combat Advisors in Afghanistan
and America's Great Betrayal**

MAURICE L. NAYLON IV

Hellgate Press



Ashland, Oregon

THE NEW MINISTRY OF TRUTH

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*To the warriors on our left and right –
may their voices be heard.*

If you're a veteran coping with your own anger and frustration,
writing can help. Share your story at www.newministryoftruth.us.

Praise for *The New Ministry of Truth*

“A solid, down-to-earth, honest narrative that shows the skills an adviser must learn. On top of that, Chipp has the insight and sense of humor to describe the whackiness of our endless mission in faraway and fractured Afghanistan.”

—Bing West, author of *The Wrong War* and *One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War*

“THE NEW MINISTRY OF TRUTH is an honest, gut-wrenching account of Chipp Naylor’s service in Afghanistan as a military adviser. Written clearly, cogently and bluntly, it is the kind of no b.s. memoir one expects from a United States Marine. But it is also a thoughtful, analytical and intimate account of America’s longest war—and the challenges and frustrations endemic to it.”

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“Naylor grinds down to the grain describing the turbulence of being a military advisor during The Long War—written in plain speak with no punches pulled. If there was a military decoration for, ‘telling it like it is,’ Naylor’s award citation is already written.”

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—Gil Barndollar, Center for the National Interest,
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“Naylor's story is an unflinchingly honest account of the absurdity of the Afghan war, as told by someone who led soldiers from three separate nations in combat—simultaneously. It is also a case study in how Marine advisors train, learn, and fight alongside foreign troops, and will certainly take its place in the annals of Marine combat advising.”

—Sam Long, former Marine Corps infantry officer and combat advisor

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PREFACE

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THIS IS NOT a traditional war story or combat memoir; if you're looking for the daily grind of battle that so many Marines and soldiers faced during their time in Afghanistan, this isn't it. For those stories, read about Marines fighting in Sangin District, soldiers in the Korengal Valley, the battle for the Shahi-Kot Valley, and countless other accounts of truly heroic combat actions. For us, things were actually pretty good. Tasked with defending the largest coalition base in Afghanistan, we had plenty of amenities, more air support than we could hope for, and, all-in-all, a pretty "country club" deployment. Frankly, if we weren't in the middle of Afghanistan, Bagram Airfield may as well have been thrown down in the middle of any military town in America. This reality begs the question, what's the point of writing this? Why is this book important?

On one hand, selfishly, writing this has been an exercise in catharsis for me. Country club or not, seven months in a combat zone can be a stressful experience. More specifically, seven months of sending guys out on security patrols and deliberate operations round-the-clock, selecting the villages that become their objectives- and potentially the places they're killed- wears you out. For seven months, you can never "turn off," regardless of the Pizza Hut and Green Beans Coffee a few hundred meters

away, as you always have someone outside-the-wire, someone in harm's way. And, as combat advisors working with forces from both the Republic of Georgia and Afghanistan, culture clash proved another recurring source of stress.

On the other hand, the above stress was significantly compounded by realities and decisions unrelated to the individuals outside of Bagram trying to kill us on a daily basis or the forces we were advising, which leads to the primary purpose of this book. As the combat advisors to a battalion of Georgians charged with securing the interior and exterior of America's largest base in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, we found ourselves in a unique situation. Broadly speaking, the war in Afghanistan included two categories of service members: those making decisions within the confines of a base, and those executing those decisions and fighting outside of a base. Our position and role on Bagram Airfield placed us at the nexus of the highest-level generals in the former category while conducting the security operations outside-the-wire at the lowest level of the latter category. On one day, I found myself eating lunch with the 4-star general in charge of all coalition forces in Afghanistan, on another day conducting a deliberate operation searching for IED caches in an Afghan village. Consequently, as 2014 rolled into 2015, and we saw the "end of combat operations" and beginning of the Resolute Support mission, I had keen insight into both A) the operational-level decisions being made by the generals, and B) the tangible and direct impact those decisions had on the guys fighting day-in and day-out to secure a base.

This proximity to the decision makers in Afghanistan, and the effects their decisions had, is why this book is so important. I am neither a smart man nor an eloquent writer, but I have a story that, in my opinion, needs to be told: the development of America's new Ministry of Truth in Afghanistan, and our country's betrayal of the servicemembers sent to carry out its whims.

A NOTE ON NAMES

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AT THE END of the day, this is my story, written from my perspective; recognizing this, it will have all the biases, flaws, and misperceptions associated with a first-person narrative. Furthermore, there are individuals in my story I paint in a particularly negative light. My intent is not to ridicule these individuals in a public arena, but to expose the broader context of flawed decision-making and distorted priorities that Afghanistan circa 2014-15 became.

Having outlined the above, I will use the convention of referring to the people in this book by first names, call signs, or military titles; they know who they are, and lacking explicit permission to do otherwise, I'd like to honor their privacy. For the readers, if this system disrupts your appreciation for the story, I apologize in advance.

PART I

THE WORK-UP

January-May 2014

THE RIFLE RANGE

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SURPRISINGLY, THE START of my time as a combat advisor began in the footsteps of the *Top Gun* cast, that is, hanging around the air station in Miramar, California. After filming epic “we were inverted” and shirtless beach volleyball scenes at what had been Naval Air Station Miramar, the early nineties Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) hearings saw a transfer of the base from the Navy to the Marine Corps. In some Jedi mind trick that I certainly don’t understand, Congress decided that it would be more cost effective to call the base *Marine Corps* Air Station Miramar, as opposed to *Naval* Air Station Miramar. Same base, same pot of money, different name—the logic and cost savings are infallible.

But, my story isn’t about Miramar (though it’s a fitting place to begin my path towards the boondoggle that Afghanistan 2014-15 would be). In January 2014, I was serving as an infantry company executive officer (XO) with Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, a unit based a few miles up the road from Miramar at Camp Pendleton, the sprawling Marine base along the Pacific Ocean and I-5 between San Diego and Los Angeles. In this capacity, my company commander and I were down at Miramar with the whole company using the air station’s rifle

range to conduct our shooting qualification, an annual requirement for Marines.

Hanging out with Chris, the company commander, at the end of a day's shoot, he received a call from our battalion's XO (I was a company XO responsible for roughly 150 Marines, whereas the battalion XO is a more senior officer responsible for five individual companies and closer to 800 Marines). Listening to Chris's side of the conversation, I heard something along these lines: "Yes, sir. I'm sitting right next to him, sir. Aye, sir, I'll have him see you in your office when we're back to Pendleton tomorrow, sir." Regressing to the mindset of a high schooler who's been caught doing something wrong, my immediate reaction to the side of the conversation I heard was, "Shit, what did I do?"

Fortunately, I wasn't being court martialed for something I'd done. But, I was being offered an opportunity to go to Afghanistan. Apparently, our battalion's higher headquarters, 5th Marine Regiment (in practical terms, my boss's boss's boss) had been told by some general further up the food chain that the regiment needed to provide some infantry officers to support an individual augment, or IA, mission to Afghanistan. Most military deployments consist of an organic unit, such as my battalion, heading overseas to complete some mission; but, at least in the Marines, another deployment path exists, more the red-headed-stepchild approach: temporarily formed teams of IAs thrown together to complete some mission that doesn't fit within the standard deployment cycle or job description of an infantry battalion. And, my mother's opinion aside, we IAs are typically not selected as a result of our outstanding performance, more often chosen for having the bare minimum requirements to meet the manpower tax imposed (no one wants to give up their unit's rock stars). Take me, for instance: I happened to be the most junior captain in the battalion, which, as I'd find out, made me a prime candidate for either A) this requirement, or B) staying back from our next deployment to be in charge of the

Marines with medical and legal issues preventing them from deploying- the two options I'd soon find out lay ahead of me.

Pressing Chris for more information, all he could tell me was that, yes, the XO had asked if I'd be interested in this upcoming IA deployment to Afghanistan, and no, he didn't provide any other details. I'd have to wait until the next day, when, returning to Camp Pendleton, I could swing by the XO's office to get the whole picture.

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GEORGIA (NOT THE STATE)
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TURNS OUT WHAT I thought would be the “whole picture” was actually a small sliver of something resembling a picture. Arriving back to the 5th Marine Regiment area of Camp Pendleton, isolated in the far northern reaches of base and nestled in the rolling hills of southern California, I walked up the hill from the Weapons Company office to our battalion headquarters to meet the XO.

If you’ve never served in the military, popular culture makes it seem as if the Marine Corps (and every other service) runs on motivational speeches, epic assaults, and hell-or- high-water last stands. In reality, the Department of Defense runs on e-mails and PowerPoint slides. Fittingly, the power on our portion of base happened to be out the afternoon I returned from Miramar, grinding all staff work to a halt as no one could access e-mail accounts. So, rather than get a full run down of the IA job I’d been offered, the conversation with the XO went something like this:

XO: “Capt Naylon, the battalion needs to provide an infantry officer to an upcoming IA, and we think you’d be the perfect candidate.” (As I’ve already stated, “perfect” should have been replaced with “convenient”.)

Me: “Sounds good, sir. What’re the details?”

XO: “Well, I have some info in an e-mail, but, since I can’t access that right now, I’m fairly certain it’s going to involve some time in Georgia and then a deployment to Afghanistan.”

Me: “Any options, sir, or am I being tasked with this?”

XO: “We’re not going to tell you that you have to do it, but the alternative is staying back from our Australia deployment to be in charge of the RBE (remain behind element).”

I learned two things from this exchange. First, I would definitely not be deploying to Darwin, Australia with our battalion as planned, so I either could A) go to Afghanistan, or B), serve as the designated cat herder responsible for a bunch of Marines who, for either legal issues, medical issues, or some combination of the two, would not be deploying. To an outside observer, this wouldn’t seem like much of a decision at all: stay in sunny southern California for six months babysitting, or go halfway around the world to some country full of a bunch of people trying to kill Americans? While somewhat tongue-in-cheek (but not completely), anyone who’s worked with an RBE will likely agree, six months of trying to get a bunch of people with no fucks to give to care just a little bit would prove far more detrimental to one’s health than deploying to a combat zone. So yeah, I sure as shit wasn’t going to do that.

That leads to the second thing I learned: the IA I’d be doing was part of the Georgia Deployment Program. While the XO didn’t know the background, coincidentally, I had a pretty good idea of what I’d be doing, at least conceptually. A few years before my meeting with the XO, a good friend of mine served as the logistics officer for a small group of Marines that went to the Republic of Georgia to embed with a battalion of Georgian soldiers, train, then deploy with the battalion as combat advisors to Afghanistan.

Yes, this is the small country of Georgia, not the American state of peaches, peanuts, and the Braves. Located in the stretch of land known as the Caucasus, Georgia's in a region that connects Europe and Asia, and is wedged between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea.

Specifically, Georgia is bordered to the west by the Black Sea, to the north by Russia, and to the south and southwest by Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, respectively. To the best of my very limited knowledge at the time, Georgia had been committing troops to Afghanistan for a while now. So, what does this tiny, former Soviet country have to do with Afghanistan? Well, cynically, and I offer the disclaimer that I certainly was not part of any national strategy discussions conducted by the Georgian Ministry of Defense and president, I'd say that Georgia's commitment to Afghanistan has little to do with that central Asian nation. Rather, this has everything do with its neighbor to the north, the Russian Bear that walked all over the country in a brief 2008 war with Georgia. By offering its soldiers to fight in a conflict that really has nothing to do with its national interests, Georgia sought to build support for accession into NATO and, ideally, a hedge against future Russian hostilities.

But, I digress. Stepping off my speculative soapbox and returning to Camp Pendleton in January 2014, I still had no idea of any timelines for what I'd be doing. The only real details the XO had were that I'd need to report to some place called the Advisor Training Cell the following Monday.

Not knowing whether I'd be leaving for Georgia in three days, weeks, or months, I headed home to digest these new developments.

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LEAVING 1ST BATTALION, 5TH MARINES

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AFTER A WEEKEND mulling over how things with this IA gig were going to unfold, things started rolling the following Monday morning. Fortunately, the power was back on at our portion of Camp Pendleton, so, with Microsoft Outlook accounts flowing, I got a little more info. Touching base with the battalion XO again, he printed some specific instructions he'd tracked down for checking in at this Advisor Training Cell (ATC), an organization down on the south part of Camp Pendleton that, from my powers of deduction, likely trained advisors. Basically, I needed to get my medical and dental records, rifle and pistol, and night vision goggles and drive my happy self down there by the end of the week.

Technically, I'd remain a part of 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, but, for all intents and purposes, I'd be "OFF," that is, on my own fucking program.

Now that I knew the short-term timeline, I could focus on wrapping things up with the battalion and transferring my responsibilities as the Weapons Company XO. To anyone willing to listen, I describe the role of company XO as the most valuable job you'll never want to have again; in a non-stop firehose of

overseeing a multimillion dollar armory, coordinating the logistical requirements for three platoons, planning training, running the company's day-to-day operations, and just generally putting out fires, life sucks. But, in balancing these disparate responsibilities, you learn a couple valuable skills: 1) managerial organization (sink or swim...), and 2) how to FITFO (figure it the fuck out). Essentially, serving as an XO is like acting as the oil in an engine; you're not making the car move, but the engine sure as shit can't get things going without the oil lubricating it. Though I didn't know it at the time, these skills- often learned through screwing things up and trial and error- would be crucial moving forward as a combat advisor.

So yeah, I wasn't sorry to leave the XO job itself, but I was certainly sorry to leave the dudes I worked with- particularly the platoon commanders and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), two groups that formed the heart and soul of the company. Fortunately, the battalion XO, a driving force in manpower management for the whole battalion, sought my feedback on who should replace me. Through the shared misery and suffering of serving together in an infantry unit, leaders develop intense pride in both their unit and the Marines in it, and it meant the world to me to recommend a close friend, my buddy Josh, with whom I'd gone through most of my Marine Corps training and the last deployment, to replace me. While he certainly took a lot of time "mother-fucking" me about throwing him under the bus, as he had to leave a platoon commander gig he loved, turning over my XO responsibilities to him, a guy I significantly trusted and respected, eased the burden of leaving Weapons Company.

After spending a few days turning over my XO responsibilities to Josh, I made my first trip down to ATC. Unlike San Mateo, 5th Marine Regiment's infantry camp tucked into the inland hills and rugged terrain of northern Camp Pendleton, I'd be conducting my advisor training in the picturesque Del Mar area on the south

side of base, a palm tree lined area nestled between I-5 and the Pacific coastline. On the first Monday I arrived, step 1 was finding the armory. The Marine Corps is particularly anal retentive about its weapons and gear accountability, so very strict procedures and paperwork requirements exist for moving weapons and optics from one armory to another. So, with paperwork, weapons, and optics in hand, I found the ATC armory and turned in all of my gear, freeing me up to start exploring my “home” for the next several months.

I-4

ADVISOR TRAINING CALL

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UNLIKE NORMAL NEIGHBORHOODS, most military buildings and centers on a base don't have typical street addresses; rather, building numbers are used that indicate A) the broad area on base (the first two digits), and B) the specific location within that area (the last two or three digits). I'm pretty sure that somewhere out there, a Marine or administrator exists that understands the details of this location system, but that Marine's certainly not me. Armed with a building number for ATC and not much more, I drove around Del Mar's grid system of streets and military command headquarters looking for this advisor place.

After a few false starts / questionable directions from random Marines on the street (e.g. "Yeah I think I've heard of that place—head about three blocks that way, turn left at the chow hall, and stop before you get to the water"), I arrived at my destination. In retrospect, that first impression of ATC would foreshadow our whole experience as advisors.

Surrounded by beautiful headquarters buildings, military recreational bungalows on the Pacific shores, and palm trees, ATC was a clump of trailers and a hodgepodge of generators surrounded by chain link fence; though the location was beautiful—top of the escarpment that descends towards the ocean— the ad

hoc nature of the place, especially relative to its far nicer surrounding commands—seemed to scream that advisors were second-class citizens in the eyes of “Big Marine Corps.”

Despite my initial, negative impression of ATC, this advisor schoolhouse would prove me wrong, embodying one of the mantras that keeps a chip on the shoulder of underfunded and undersupplied Marines everywhere- “do more with less.” Walking up the ramp of the trailer labeled ATC, I was surprised to find a buddy of mine from college and fellow Marine, Sam, sitting inside. After the standard round of catch-up pleasantries associated with not having seen someone in five years, he told me he was the new operations officer for ATC, having just returned from a deployment with the Georgians himself. With only a few months remaining on his time in the Marine Corps, it didn’t make sense to send Sam back to a battalion, so he’d worked out a deal to wrap up running the day-to-day operations at ATC, putting his real-world lessons learned as an advisor to good use training us bright-eyed and bushy-tailed newbies.

Having Sam at ATC would be a godsend over the next few months. For one, he was the consummate professional in terms of taking ownership of ATC training and operations. And, more importantly, he possessed a wealth of knowledge on Georgian culture, military, and the realities of Marine-Georgian coexistence, as he’d just spent the last eleven months of his life embedded with one of the country’s battalions. Sitting down to shoot the shit with him that first day, Sam filled in a bunch of my unknowns regarding the upcoming deployment.

The full name of our mission was the Georgia Deployment Program—International Security Assistance Force, or GDP-ISAF, and our advisor team would be the 14th group of Marines conducting the mission, designating us Rotation, or ROTO, 14. Within GDP-ISAF, two separate teams existed- the Georgia Liaison Team (GLT) and the Georgia Training Team (GTT). We

would be the former, a small team of active duty Marines tasked with embedding with a Georgian infantry battalion, conducting three months of training side-by-side in Georgia, a culminating mission rehearsal exercise at a US base in Germany, and a seven-month deployment as combat advisors in Afghanistan.

While we as the GLT would focus our efforts on developing relationships and training side-by-side with our partnered battalion, the other half of the GDP-ISAF mission, the GTT, was composed of a mix of active and reserve Marines tasked with training the Georgian military's own cadre of instructors, the Georgians overseeing the training of our partner battalion. These Marines would spend five to six months on a training base in Georgia, mentoring and developing the country's resident military instructors while building the Georgian military's resident training expertise. At the end of their time in Georgia, the GTT Marines would hand over their responsibilities to an incoming GTT and return to the States.

Having broadly outlined our mission, Sam explained how the next four months of training at ATC would work. Over the next week, the remainder of the GLT Marines would make their way down to Del Mar from their parent units to check in with ATC. We'd then conduct a pre-deployment training program, or "work-up," tailored to preparing advisors for combat. Some of the wickets we'd need to hit as a team would be combat life-saving ("first aid," in non-military speak), combat marksmanship ("shooting rifles and pistols," in non-military speak), training and licensing in armored vehicles, counter-improvised explosive device (C-IED) training, and some sort of month-long basic advisor training out in Virginia Beach (still needed some more details on that). During the talk with Sam and our review of the upcoming work-up, one thing was apparent- as a small team, we'd all be doing everything, lacking the manpower luxuries that would allow for any one individual to not become "brilliant in the basics" of combat patrolling.