

THE WESTERN FRONT

part 1 of 3

Archer Garrett

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About this Book:

This is part 1 of a multipart series; I hope you enjoy my work.

Parts 2 & 3 are available on Amazon.com

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*Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the
righteous, so that justice is perverted.*

-Habakkuk 1:4

Prologue

The south Texas sun had long since been replaced by the full harvest moon, but the day's arid temperatures had not yet fully retreated. The huge orange disk in the night sky appeared so close that one might reach out and touch it. The wind had refused to blow for days, amplifying the heat from earlier. Despite the miserable conditions, they were relieved; this would be their final patrol before heading back to their redoubt on the tip of South Padre Island for a much needed break. The members of the Texas State Guard's First Regiment were indeed soldiers, but few of them had real combat experience prior to this. The Alamo Guards were mostly known for their work in the aftermath of hurricanes and occasional support on the border. They took their new role in stride, as best they could, but none of the men in the squad had signed up for action like this. They had all removed their name tapes early in the operation after reports surfaced that some of the soldiers' families had started receiving death threats; they now communicated strictly by code names.

The three-story adobe-style mansion sitting on two acres just north of Lasara had served as their forward operating base for the past week. It was surrounded by fallow fields on three sides and the small southwestern town to the south; the view atop the high, flat roof was better than anywhere else for miles. The home's cast-in-place concrete walls provided excellent protection from small arms fire, and the surrounding eight foot high brick, perimeter

wall afforded them additional cover and security; in short, it was as perfect a location as was available. They wondered who the previous owner was, and if there would ever come a day when he could return. Pictures still hung on the wall: group shots while on vacation, during holidays and other memorable moments in the life of the now displaced family that once dwelled here. The owner's decision to install an indoor swimming pool was now a welcome reprieve for the weary soldiers, and a boost to morale in between patrols; it helped wash away the memories of the brutal south Texas heat, and fierce gun battles with men known for their vicious treatment of prisoners. The Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel had formed an uneasy alliance to push the gringos north; once the Americans were sufficiently broken, the cartels would divide the spoils and territory amongst themselves. The Z-G, as they were commonly referred to now, had developed a brutal reputation for flaying prisoners alive; this reputation had resulted in a mass exodus of locals some time back.

The unit's squad leader, now referred to simply as Barrett, leaned over several aerial, topographic and road maps spread out haphazardly on the billiards table in the salon, as he discussed the specifics of their final patrol with six of his men.

"Our scouts have observed several suspected hostile vehicles in and around Raymondville earlier this evening. The Z-G rarely practice light discipline, so they should be fairly simple to locate. We leave out in two hours; be ready. We will locate, identify and engage the targets, if they are in fact Z-G. Remember, all radio communication is to be in coded Spanish; if our communication is being monitored by them, or anyone else, hopefully it will sound like just another Z-G squabble over the airwaves. We are more likely to avoid a third

party encounter or Z-G reinforcements that way. I want redundant functionality checks on all equipment, especially the infrared lighting on the Humvees; this is our last night on vacation and we don't need any surprises. We've lost too many squads already, and I am particularly partial to this one."

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At 2100 hours, the sixteen guardsmen quietly pulled out of their lavish forward operating base into the disputed borderlands that was once south Texas. The mood of the men was probably not unlike the mood of a different group of Texans in a small, Spanish mission nearly two hundred years prior. Barrett had even taken his namesake from a kindred soul that had fought and died in that same mission. Their situation was not much different from their ancestors' situation either; the redoubt they had established on South Padre Island had been hugely successful in combating the cartels, but their success had begun to gain the attention of the cartels as well. The Alamo Guards had planted moored mines in the Port Mansfield Cut nearly forty miles north, effectively blocking the only safe passage into the waters beyond the barrier island. The cartels had only two options on the water: travel north one hundred miles and battle Port Aransas, or bring the fight to South Padre Island; they had decided on the island. The state guardsmen had repelled several combined land and sea assaults from the causeway and the pass, but the assaults were getting fiercer. The Alamo Guards of South Padre Island knew it was only a matter of time before they would all die, if reinforcements and supplies did not arrive soon.

After several minutes of driving, they located their quarry. With all of the vehicles' lights off, except for the imperceptible infrared lighting that increased the effectiveness of their night vision equipment, they closed to within five hundred feet of four, small pickups slowly cruising

east towards Raymondville on Highway 186. The big harvest moon was the guardsmen's enemy tonight as well, because it illuminated the plains and everything in it. An observant occupant in one of the pickup trucks would soon detect the four Humvees slowly approaching from behind. One of the guardsmen popped open the top hatch on the front Humvee and braced his elbows on the roof, as he peered through his night vision binoculars; the trucks' beds were filled with silhouettes of riders and their easily recognizable AK-47 rifles. He climbed back down into the Humvee as he said, "Our scouts were right Barrett; they ain't cowboys."

Barrett keyed his radio and tapped his finger against the microphone twice slowly and twice quickly – their confirmation code for hostiles. The four Humvees accelerated in unison, lurching forward with their diesel engines roaring like fearsome chupacabras. By the time the cartels realized they were being pursued, the angry three ton monsters were nearly on top of them; the men in the back of the pickups were too preoccupied with bracing for impact and yelling, "Go, go!" in thick Spanish that they never considered returning fire.

The Humvees were four wide and nearing 70 MPH as they reached the two rear pickups; the trucks' drivers were trying to accelerate, but were hopelessly blocked by the slower reactions of their amigos in front of them. One of the rear pickups jerked hard to the left and off the highway onto a dusty farm road; the high speed transition from asphalt to sand and gravel spun the light rear end of the truck around, and flung a man from the bed of the truck thirty feet before a sudden thud and a final bounce. The remaining, rear truck was no match for the two Humvees that slammed their massive winches and steel brush guards into its tailgate; an explosion of screams and wrinkling of sheet metal pierced the night's silence as the

pickup lurched forward, and was then pushed along the highway like some strange, landside Texan barge and tugboat. As the two outside Humvees launched forward, as if they were propelled from a slingshot, two men popped the top hatches of the center Humvees and engaged the vehicles' M134 Miniguns on the rear pickup; they each let nearly thirty rounds of 7.62 NATO loose, and annihilated the vehicle in less than a second.

The two front pickups were now well aware of what fate awaited them, so they roared forward with speeds that were unexpected from their rusted and dented exteriors. The two Humvees were nearing their top speed and closing quickly, but the trucks began to slowly pull away. The riders in the back had all witnessed the two Miniguns eviscerate the other pickup, and had no desire to elicit a similar response directed towards them; they suddenly disappeared below the walls of the trucks' beds. Barrett keyed up his radio again and spoke to his squad in coded Spanish.

"It's okay, let them pull off some, I'd rather not have AK rounds flying at us. Let's see if they lead us somewhere; if they get too far ahead, we'll just use the Miniguns."

The pickups swerved in opposite directions at an intersecting dirt road; The Humvees split up in pairs and began to gain back the lost ground. The drivers realized the flaw in their evasive maneuver, and within a mile were back on the straight asphalt drag of Highway 186. As they approached the city, they blew past a green road sign to their right that read:

Raymondville City Limit

Pop. 9733.

A mile into town as they passed the boxy, two-story City Hall, the Humvees' radio squawked to life, "Barrett, we've got company at our twelve on the 77 overpass; they look like Humvees, but smaller. Maybe MRAPS?"

"Yea, I see them. Those boys are a long way from home; I've seen Federales a few times, but no U.S. military south of Corpus Christi in months. Let's welcome them to the great state of Texas. Front two Humvees, get a man ready up top; as soon as the pickup trucks are under the overpass, hit them with the Mk 19. If a couple 40 mm grenades under the feet of our boys up top don't scare them back to Corpus, then maybe they will be worth having around."

The lighter and faster pickup trucks had a ten second lead on the Humvees as they approached the overpass. They would occasionally perform a slalom maneuver in the highway, as if the drivers anticipated another hailstorm from the Miniguns at any moment; their unease helped the Humvees maintain a closer tail than they otherwise would have. Barrett gripped the radio's microphone fiercely in anticipation with his gloved hand. He preferred to use the old style radio microphone while in the vehicle; it reminded him of a different time when wars were fought in distant lands, rather than American farm towns. Twenty seconds until the fireworks.

Barrett leaned forward, as he squinted through the front windshield with his night vision goggles, a smirk crept across his face; he keyed the mic, "Everybody ready up top?" Two *affirmatives* echoed back at him almost in unison. "Hold for my order." He craned his head up and noticed the guns on top of the three MRAPs.

Fifteen seconds.

The driver of the lead pickup was sweating and swearing profusely; at this point, he had no promise of a next breath. Their only hope, in his mind, was to make it to the overpass, swerve across two lanes to jump the highway's edge curb and pray he could manage to retain some semblance of control of the truck at 80 mph, to guide it around the sharp curve under the bridge that would take them south on to Highway 77 – and survival. He knew the Humvees could never negotiate the turn in time, so just maybe they would turn their attention to the other truck and engage them, while he made his way to Avondale and beyond.

Ten seconds.

Barrett studied what he could now identify as MRAP M-ATVs with their armaments pointed ominously downward.

Eight seconds.

His mind had been trying to process why they would allow friendlies to sweep under their barrels – unless, no – impossible, he could plainly see the markings on the vehicles from this distance.

Seven seconds.

They were obviously U.S. military. Weren't they? And yet, something was wrong.

Six seconds.

The driver of the lead pickup had maneuvered himself to the far right lane of the highway. The onramp for Highway 77 south was fast approaching. His palms were sweaty on the wheel, as he prepared for the suicide maneuver; he never bothered to look up at the overpass. His focus was on his exit strategy.

Five seconds.

Barrett's stomach was floating in his chest by the time he keyed the mic again; he couldn't risk the chance, and the time was now. "Up top, back in the Humvee, now! Order! Now!" The two men slid back in their cabins and slammed the top hatches shut. They were confused, and more than a little irritated; they were looking forward to rocking the world of the boys up top. As they finished the thought, they saw the first of the tracers hit the pickups in front of them and watched as the trucks seemed to buckle in pain from the hail of bullets. Then a lead, firestorm erupted on top of them. It seemed as if every square inch of their armored roof was clanging in unison. At any moment, Barrett knew the roof would surely relent and be torn apart.

The lead pickup truck careened off the road, into the ditch and then sailed through the air. Limp bodies were flung haphazardly from the bed of the flaming projectile. The other truck had spun several times and looked as if it would stop in the middle of the highway, until the front two Humvees slammed it forcefully to the other shoulder. The drivers of the rear Humvees had forecasted this maneuver and braked abruptly to avoid a collision, as their team in the front blazed a path. With the road ahead now clear, they accelerated ferociously.

Barrett quickly transitioned from shock to rage, and keyed the mic up in English for the first time.

“Shee-yit! We’re on the same team!”

No response.

“This is the unit commander for Alpha Squad, Texas State Guards, First Regiment out of South Padre Island. Identify yourselves immediately or we *will* return fire.”

The airwaves were again momentarily silent, until a man finally responded, “Oh my God; sir, do you have any casualties?” The voice of the squad leader was strained and audibly distraught. All protocol had been dropped.

The other Humvees had been following the exchange and responded to Barrett almost in unison in their code, “All clear, Sir.”

Barrett engaged the squad leader again, “Negative on the casualties. We are taking up a defensive position; I want you and your squad off that damn bridge and down here with me, on foot. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Affirmative, sir; we’re coming down.”

One

He drifted in and out of that state of consciousness that was not quite asleep, not quite awake. The sun was beginning to crest the loblolly and slash pine tops to his right and kiss the pasture beyond with its warmth. As twilight fled once again, he was gently tugged away from his lull by the morning rays of light. Jake was not sure how long it had been since he had last heard the coffee perking, but even a bitter cup would be satisfying enough. He grabbed the long-barreled revolver from the table beside him and slid it into the worn, leather holster as he sauntered into the kitchen. A smile crept across his face, as he poured the cup and stirred in the smallest amount of creamer. The percolator was just another small trespass against what was to be expected, and he relished in that.

His stroll back outside was more purposeful, as he began to feel the steamy coffee's effects. Jake gripped the revolver and slid it back onto the table, as he surveyed the back of his property and the adjoining pastures. It was peaceful and inviting, everything the world had long ceased to be. The spring fog acted like a thick blanket over the distant pond in front of him. Several wood ducks quacked argumentatively amongst themselves as they meandered aimlessly across the water, occasionally dipping beneath the surface for a hapless minnow, or perhaps some spongy pond weed. He could faintly see a few white oaks beyond the fog and the pines, as the fields eventually gave way to the stands of timber and finally the hardwood

swamp beyond. Satisfied with the serenity, he downed the last of his coffee and stepped off the deck to scan the rest of the property, and reflect.

He thought to himself, *how did we ever get so far off the right path?* He knew the answer, even as he asked himself. It was incremental; the seemingly small and unrelated choices a people make are what ultimately destroy it. The swings of society's pendulum were almost always met with a near-equal and opposite force, but the culture's rudder never got quite back on the true course. It was the nudges in the wrong direction: the values of a wiser generation that never connected with their sons and daughters; the lessons of history that were lost or rewritten. He paused for a moment as he plucked a cold-hardy mandarin and rubbed his thumb across the leathery and pitted skin before continuing. One day, a point of singularity is inevitably reached: the nudges soon enough become shoves, and reality seems to change in days and weeks, rather than generations. A paradigm shift occurs before a society's eyes, if they choose to see it.

In one motion he lobbed the unripe citrus and lifted his hand to wave to Franklin Thames, his neighbor. Frank easily had three long and hard decades on Jake. His skin was weathered by years of working the land, and his world view was molded by the time spent in reflection of wars fought long ago that he was too young to understand at the time. He wore faded brown overalls with a dusty, half-breed, western hat. Frank's right arm cradled his ancient, lever-action carbine, and his left hand pinched a hand-rolled cigarette. Frank was standing over a heap in his pasture as he motioned Jake his way. Sasha, Jake's German shepherd, was already with Frank, contently occupied with something firmly held in her mouth;

he was the only other man Sasha would tolerate. Jake had tried to break her from leaving, but if Frank was tending to the cattle, she would split time between the two men. Jake eventually relented, partly because he knew Frank appreciated her keeping watch for him while he worked.

Jake spread the barbed wire wide enough to duck through, and approached the two; the heap on the ground was now obvious to him. Frank took one last drag of the tobacco before stamping it out with the Cuban heel of his boot.

“Jake, what are we going to do? This is the second one this month. I guess it’s finally made it here.”

Jake examined the partially field dressed calf, its most prized cuts crudely removed sometime the night before. The object in Sasha’s mouth Jake had noticed from a distance was a bone of some sort that she had retrieved from the remains.

“Frank, I’m sorry; we never heard a thing. How many calves does that leave you with?”

“Ten, but I expect them to be gone before much longer, if I don’t make provisions to bring them in closer to the house. I don’t have the manpower to watch the livestock and defend the house.”

“I heard from Mr. Gaston that a farm not far from here was attacked two nights ago; there were about six of them. The gunfire woke the neighbors; they started returning fire after they realized what was going on. They hit one of them; he bled out after his friends left him.

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