

JESUS WAS AN AIRBORNE RANGER

Find Your Purpose Following the Warrior Christ



JOHN McDOUGALL
CHAPLAIN, US ARMY RANGERS

Praise for
Jesus Was an Airborne Ranger

“John McDougall ‘gets it.’ This combat-hardened warrior shatters misconceptions about Jesus, the Ultimate Warrior. Yes, Jesus is gentle, meek, and mild, but he’s also tougher than the metal spikes that fastened him to the cross for our sins and more powerful than the powers of hell that could not keep him in the grave. John rightly portrays Jesus as the Ranger we want to follow and the God we bow to worship. Read this book!”

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Army, Ret.

“Finally! A book that accurately depicts King Jesus as the tough man the Bible describes. I’m convinced great men must have a great leader to follow. Unfortunately, many pastors, chaplains, and theologians paint the picture of Jesus being weak and timid. *Jesus Was an Airborne Ranger* is for anyone who wants to know how this one man, who lived thousands of years ago, is still changing the world today.”

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—LIEUTENANT GENERAL WILLIAM “JERRY” BOYKIN,
Executive Vice President, Family Research Council

“Chaplain John McDougall caught my eye with his unexpected title and then brilliantly made his case as I turned each page. This book is biblically solid, carefully crafted, and lasered to speak to the hearts and minds of men who follow the Lord Jesus Christ. I think pastors and men’s leaders will buy this book by the case for their men.”

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“A gripping account of the salvation history of Jesus Christ as seen through the eyes of a professional soldier and military chaplain. Written from the heart and soul of a U.S. Army Airborne Ranger, Chaplain John McDougall challenges the reader to view Jesus in his image as *Christus Victor*—the ‘victorious Christ’ who conquered sin, evil, death, and the grave. This compelling book is a must read for those servant leaders who choose Jesus to ‘lead the way’ in this life and into eternity.”

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Army, Ret.

“Chaplain McDougall brings his ‘been there, done that’ experience to this project, sharing insights that will animate and motivate men—especially military men—to follow the warrior Christ. So many men see Christianity as a threat to their perception of manhood, while nothing could be further from the truth. This book will make men want to get into the fight for something much bigger than themselves.”

—CHUCK HOLTON, former Ranger, author of *Making Men: Five Steps to Growing Up*

“Don’t let the sandals fool you—the Jesus of Scripture unveiled by John McDougall was a leader of uncommon bravery, fiercely devoted to accomplishing his divine mission. His example serves as a challenge to us all. Our purpose and salvation is not to be found in comfort, but rather in hardship, struggle, and sacrifice.”

—CRAIG MULLANEY, author of *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier’s Education*

“What a powerful story of a Savior who set the example for us to follow—to lay down His life to ransom the world. John McDougall is the ideal guide in exploring the world’s greatest rescue mission; I invite you to join him!”

—CAPTAIN NATE SELF, Army Ranger and author
of *Two Wars*

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CHAPLAIN, U.S. ARMY RANGERS



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To all Rangers and their families—past and present—and especially the families of our fallen. As Sir Winston Churchill said, “Never has so much been owed by so many to so few.”

And to my three wonderful children—Lydia, Micah, and Noah. May you come to know this Airborne Ranger and follow him into the fight!

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About the Title of This Book

An old cadence was sung in the Army for many years to keep soldiers in step when marching in formation. Although it is no longer sung today, the first two verses have given me both the lens and the title for this book.

(Sung to the tune of “Do Lord”)

Jesus was an Airborne Ranger, you’ll be one too.

Jesus was an Airborne Ranger, you’ll be one too.

Jesus was an Airborne Ranger, you’ll be one too.

Look away, beyond the blue.

Jesus led a twelve-man fire team, you’ll lead one too.

Jesus led a twelve-man fire team, you’ll lead one too.

Jesus led a twelve-man fire team, you’ll lead one too.

Look away, beyond the blue.

Foreword

The warrior soul has always fascinated me. From reading Korean War comic books as a seven-year-old kid, during Army Ranger School, through my tour of duty in Vietnam, and on to more recent visits with the troops in Afghanistan, I have been intrigued by the strength and attitudes of warriors. You can see it in their eyes when the moments turn serious. War is serious business.

And war is most certainly spiritual business. Think of it—the most sacred of spiritual experiences often include the following:

- the proximity of death,
- the service of a larger purpose, and
- the sacrifice of self for another.

All of these are accentuated in combat.

Yet this refreshing book, *Jesus Was an Airborne Ranger*, is so much more than a book on combat. This is a book about Jesus at his daring, rescuing best! And your encounter with him in these pages is likely to leave you changed. As a result of indulging yourself in this book, I believe you are going to:

- love your sacrificial Lord more deeply,
- respect your military more thoughtfully, and
- become a person better equipped to “please the [O]ne who enlisted [you] as a soldier” (2 Timothy 2:4, NASB).

Life is a battle, after all. Earth is a war zone. Whether it’s backstabbing at the office or beheadings in the Middle East, all our pain can be traced, ultimately, to the Adversary of our souls.

Disappointment, discouragement, depression, or divorce—all the “d” words that haunt our lonely moments—are wounds from that struggle. Yes, “war is hell.” And the universal cry of the human heart held hostage is for a Warrior-Rescuer who is able to deliver us from the hell of our lives on a war-torn planet. That’s why I believe this potent book, initially conceived for the special operations warrior community, actually applies to everyone.

The historical Jesus is the ultimate Warrior and the only omniscient Savior. The first hint of him in the historical record occurs in the first book of the Bible. There he is pictured on page one as a wounded warrior (Genesis 3:15). The last picture of him in that same Bible portrays him mounted on a great war-horse, wearing a blood-spattered robe and wielding a sword with which he ends all wars (Revelation 19). First, last, and in between, Jesus is the ultimate Warrior.

Consider this. Scripture describes the mission of Christ’s Advent in the clearest of military terms: “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8, NASB). The modern military equivalent is nearly verbatim—the expressed mission statement of every sworn infantryman is “to close with and destroy the enemy.” Descending from the heavens above, our Savior invaded enemy space to rescue all of us held hostage by the enemy of our souls. Jesus came to set us free. Forever.

The Bible is too often discredited (usually by those who seldom read it) as something of a fairy tale written in glowing, superspiritual terms largely irrelevant to real life. This is utterly untrue. God’s Word, in both raw and profound terms, accounts for all the painful realities in this broken world. Scripture’s heroes are not flawless saints. More often, they are leaders, pioneers, visionaries, disciples, and fighters engaged in very real struggles. Abraham, usually consid-

ered the spiritual father of our faith, was something of a military man himself. He “mustered” (a military term and literal meaning of the verb in Genesis 14:14) an entire light battalion consisting of 318 of his “trained men” and ran a daring long-range night operation to rescue family members. The success of his mission would have been the envy of today’s special operations units. Moses was a major battlefield leader, as was Joshua and his battle buddy Caleb. David not only eliminated the giant, he conquered legions of his enemies, then wrote songs about his victories, including Psalm 18, where he celebrates “crushing” entire troops (v. 29). David’s best friend, Jonathan, scaled cliffs to do battle (1 Samuel 14) long before the boys of Pointe du Hoc did the same in 1944.

Then there is Jesus himself. Too often he is portrayed in the media as some kind of otherworldly space cadet, or a “gentle-Jesus-meek-and-mild” who would cast well as a model for a shampoo advertisement. But you won’t find this Jesus in the Bible. As a first-century carpenter who procured his own timber from the hillsides, he was undoubtedly a fit individual, highly skilled with hammer and chisel. And he was most clearly a warrior when he squared off with the ultimate Enemy on that piece of historic high ground. There on Mount Calvary, Jesus stood between us and all that would harm us—the very definition of a competent warrior. He took the blows, shed his blood, and gave his life on our behalf. Calvary, the centerpiece of the Bible to which every biblical story ultimately points, is the scene of the most outlandish combat in earth’s history. For every believer, it is sacred battlespace.

It should come as no surprise that one of America’s most famous five-star generals, Douglas MacArthur, would be moved to say, in his famous farewell address to the corps at West Point:

The soldier, above all other men, is required to practice the greatest act of religious training—sacrifice. In battle and in the face of danger and death, he discloses those divine attributes which his Maker gave when He created man in His own image.

No, it is no sacrilege to refer to the Savior of the world as a warrior sent from God to fight and pay the ultimate price for our rescue. *Jesus Was an Airborne Ranger. The Original.*

Stu Weber

Pastor; author of *Tender Warrior*; Ranger '67

INTRODUCTION



Making the Jump

Your Call to Be God's Airborne Ranger

Green light. Go!”

At the command, the entire mass of men and equipment inside the C-17 Globemaster sprang to life. Hearts pounding and breathing quick prayers, one hundred paratroopers shuffled toward the jumpmaster at the rear of the aircraft and the two open doors. Outside the plane, all was inky darkness.

Each man carried a thirty-eight-pound parachute on his back, a fifteen-pound reserve chute on his stomach, a sixty- to eighty-pound rucksack hanging around his knees, and a rifle attached at his left hip. With one hand he clenched a yellow static line. With the other he grasped his reserve parachute. Each paratrooper pivoted at the door, then flung his body into the void.

One of those paratroopers was me. I'd made this jump many times in training. But this night in March 2003 was different. This night I was jumping into combat in Iraq.

“One thousand, two thousand, three thousand . . .” I counted as I plummeted until—*snap!*—the shock told my body that my T-10D parachute had successfully deployed.

In the darkness, I could barely make out the faint glow of our objective—a cement tarmac—slowly approaching some four hundred feet below me. Aside from the pair of tan suede combat boots in my view, the scene looked exactly like the satellite imagery I had studied earlier that week.

Simultaneously, all around me, paratroopers were jumping from other planes. A thousand men were assigned to this mission. Our orders were to seize and control a remote runway in northern Iraq. Once the runway was secure, we could bring in more men and matériel to establish a second front in this now seven-day-old war.

The ground drew closer. Closer still. I brought my feet and knees together, knees slightly bent, and braced for impact. I knew it wasn't going to be pretty. We were all loaded heavier than usual. Inside my rucksack I carried a radio and spare batteries, two mortar rounds, and a basic load of ammunition. The ground flew toward me.

Wham! I slammed the pavement like a brick.

Momentarily stunned, I lay on my back looking into the night sky filled with jumpers. Mentally, I checked for injuries. Finding none, I stood, got out of my parachute harness, removed my M4 carbine from its case, and chambered the first round.

Looking at the landmarks on the ground and the men around me, I realized something that was true of both my location and my calling as an Airborne Ranger:

I was right where I was supposed to be.

DROPPED INTO BATTLE

Soldiers aren't the only ones dropped into battles. You may have never worn combat fatigues, but like me, you suddenly find yourself in the middle of a "war."

- Maybe your integrity is threatened. You face a harmful path, but it looks enticing. You're tempted to cave under the pressure. What do you do?
- Maybe your marriage or home life is a war zone. A conflict lingers no matter how you try to solve it. Days and nights feel chaotic. Dark. Heavy. You wonder where to turn.
- Maybe the bomb of a personal crisis has detonated. The ones you value most lie bleeding and wounded. They look to you for leadership, but you don't know what to do.
- Maybe security slips through your fingers. You work hard to be a good provider to those who matter most, but you just can't get ahead. Your foundation feels unsettled. Your future feels vulnerable to attack.
- Maybe you long for greater purpose. Your days are filled with activity, but to what end? A sense of meaning is missing. You want to do something lasting. Significant. True.

You may not realize this, but someone fights in front of you and beside you — humanity's greatest Warrior — and he is calling you to join him in fulfilling history's greatest mission. ★

There's good news. Although this world is filled with combat and casualties, you were made for this fight. You were designed for the front lines. *You are right where you are supposed to be!* And you are not alone in the battle.

You may not realize this, but someone fights in front of you and beside you—humanity’s greatest Warrior—and he is calling you to join him in fulfilling history’s greatest mission. No matter what fight you’re facing today, you can win your battles when you follow the Warrior Christ.

My mission that night in Iraq was to seize a runway in contested territory, and we did it. But God has something far more significant and lasting for you to accomplish. In the pages ahead, I want to show you what that is.

MY MISSION

I’ve been an Airborne Ranger for most of my adult life. I finished Airborne training at age twenty-two and graduated from the U.S. Army Ranger School nine months later. I served more than ten years in Airborne and Ranger assignments, being a part of such famed units as the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the 82nd Airborne Division, and the 75th Ranger Regiment. In that decade of service, I completed more than sixty-five parachute jumps—including the night combat jump I just described—into seven countries on four continents. As a graduate of jumpmaster training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, I inspected hundreds of parachutes for potential hazards and safely led dozens of Airborne operations. I deployed multiple times to hostile areas, including Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. I’ve spent much of my life serving alongside some of our nation’s greatest soldiers.

But while I’ve been an Airborne Ranger a long time, I’ve been a follower of the Warrior Christ even longer. So it came as no great surprise to me when, while shaving at a bathroom sink in Kirkuk, Iraq, early on November 17, 2003, I heard God calling me to leave the infantry and become an Army chaplain. In the days that fol-

lowed, God showed me that he would use my experiences as an Airborne Ranger to help me minister to this unique and elite company of warriors. He'd brought me to these units to teach me the language, culture, and customs of this group, so that one day I could be their chaplain.

That's what I am today: a pastor to Airborne Rangers. I'm writing these words while stationed in Afghanistan, surrounded by elite warriors who willingly don the uniform and stand in the gap to defend you and me.

How do most churches today portray Jesus? He's the tender shepherd, meek and mild. He's the long-haired boyfriend we're all supposed to sing love songs to. He's the bearded therapist who wishes we'd all become nice guys (and we all know where nice guys finish). ★

Over the years, as I've listened to Rangers share their experiences with Christianity, I've noticed a problem. It shows up again and again. Mind you, these warriors are among the toughest of the tough. They're the type of men who walk into their Army career center, slam their fist on the desk, glare at the recruiter, and growl, "Give me the hardest thing you've got!" But here's the tension: it's hard for tough guys to follow Jesus.

The problem isn't Jesus.

The problem is the "Jesus" who is presented to them.

Ask yourself, how do most churches today portray Jesus? He's the tender shepherd, meek and mild. He's the long-haired boyfriend, the one we're all supposed to sing love songs to. He's the bearded

therapist who wishes we'd all become nice guys (and we all know where nice guys finish). How could our nation's fighting men possibly relate to such a pale-faced, slack-jawed pretty boy?

Perhaps you've felt the same way. It's not just soldiers who are put off by the image of a wimpy Jesus. Lots of men — and women — have the same reaction.

We've been handed a skewed, sanitized, and weakened understanding of Jesus. Not only is this bad theology, but also it gives us a bad role model. Real men can't relate to this feminized Christ. And they shouldn't have to. The Sunday-school Jesus gives us no understanding of why we're here on earth, what we're up against, and what we're supposed to do. *We need something more.*

I'm writing this book to show a different kind of Jesus. I want to help reclaim who Christ really is, the Christ of the Bible. I want you to understand that Jesus is wilder and tougher than you could ever imagine. And I want to help you find in his story your own life-defining mission. I'm going to use a military analogy throughout this book to accomplish that.

FOLLOWING CHRIST THE CONQUEROR

Does it sound strange to compare Jesus to an Army Ranger? Of course Jesus never served in the military, wore camouflage, or jumped out of an airplane with an assault rifle. I get that. But I'm putting the picture of a Ranger in front of you as a helpful illustration of who Jesus was, how he lived his life, and what he calls his followers to do.

Let's put the imagery in a nutshell: an Airborne Ranger executes daring missions to rescue humanity at the cost of his own life. That's exactly what Jesus does for us.

This is no daytime-talk-show Jesus. This is Medal of Honor—

worthy Jesus! Someone men would want to honor and emulate. Let's see him as he really is—a battle-scarred Combatant who stared death in the face . . . and won.

In his classic book *Mere Christianity*, theologian C. S. Lewis wrote,

Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.¹

I wholeheartedly agree. We are trapped in hostile territory, and our Rescuer has come to save us.

Some will argue that this military talk goes too far. After all, didn't Jesus come as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)? Didn't he tell us to turn the other cheek (Luke 6:29)?

Yes! But these lines don't tell the whole story. Jesus was not a bloodthirsty warmonger. But he wasn't a nonconfrontational wimp, either. Against great odds, he defied an empire and changed history. Men and women called him Master. They took his message around the world. They stayed true to him even when it cost them their lives.

Jesus was like an elite, divinely commissioned Soldier. He was strong. He was on an important mission. And he courageously squared off against the Enemy of our souls. ★

We have to ask: Who was this Jesus . . . *really*?

I think the Ranger analogy can help us get a fresh view. The

biblical picture of Christ looks like this: Jesus was like an elite, divinely commissioned Soldier. He was strong. He was on an important mission. And he courageously squared off against the Enemy of our souls. When we recover this neglected aspect of his identity, then we can restore a balanced understanding of his person and work.

I didn't invent this view of Christ. My portrayal of him as an Airborne Ranger is merely a modern twist on an ancient Christian understanding.

As early as the first century AD, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were being compared to a great military victory over a formidable enemy. This doctrine is called *Christus victor* (Latin for "Christ the Conqueror"), and for many centuries it served as the primary framework for understanding Jesus's mission on earth.² According to this doctrine, the skirmish in the Garden of Eden was nothing short of a military coup. Satan, a chief angel, usurped God's rightful rule as King and placed humanity in slavery (2 Peter 2:19; 1 John 5:19). Not willing to surrender, God dispatched his greatest Warrior to defeat the Enemy and rescue his people (Genesis 3:15; Matthew 1:21). About this great victory, Jesus said, "Take heart, because I have overcome [conquered or prevailed over] the world" (John 16:33). The apostle Paul added that Christ "descended to our lowly world" and then "led a crowd of captives" away to high ground (Ephesians 4:8–9, from Psalm 68:18). In other words, he came to earth to defeat our great captor and take us to be with him.

I believe that as Western society has grown more domesticated and protected from hard realities, we have rejected *Christus victor* in lieu of more palatable doctrines. Now, many view war as inherently evil and peace as supremely virtuous. To suit our sensibilities, we have sanitized the person and story of Jesus, removing any mention of conflict or battle.

If you agree even a little bit with my argument, then you can see that this adds up to a huge loss, especially for men. This messianic makeover strips from Christ anything heroic or noble. The resulting religion is like our new deity—spineless, spiritless, lifeless.

No wonder many Christians feel as if they are just going through the motions in life. No wonder so many men I know don't feel at home in most worship services and small groups. We have lost the man-on-a-mission intensity that drove Jesus to the cross. A boy-band Jesus will never change the brokenness in our world. And if you and I follow that kind of Jesus, neither will we.

This messianic makeover strips from Christ anything heroic or noble. The resulting religion is like our new deity—spineless, spiritless, lifeless. ★

We need to shove aside the pretty-boy image of Christ. We need to meet—and follow—Christ the Conqueror.

Most men I've talked to, whether civilian or military, are just not compelled to give their lives to a lesser Lord. Why should they be?

Why should *you* be?

THE LIFE YOU WERE MEANT TO LEAD

It's not enough to merely be aware of the real Jesus. A superficial introduction won't do. We need to take another look at the whole amazing story of Scripture. If we do, we'll come to know Jesus as our heaven-sent Rescuer, and we'll understand that our directive is to follow him wholeheartedly—his passion, his purpose, and yes, his heroic sacrifice.

I don't know about you, but the meek Messiah is far too timid to confront the pressing realities of evil that I, my family, and my fighting men face every day. He's much too tolerant to stand up for what's right and true and noble and good. If we follow the wrong Jesus, then we will become like flavorless salt or a hidden candle—completely useless (Matthew 5:13, 15).

Many Christians today have a bunker mentality, content to wait in the relative calm of their churches while enemy shelling wreaks havoc on families and individuals outside. In the military, we give such soldiers the worst possible epithet—*cowards*.

No self-respecting Ranger wants to sit on the sidelines while others do the fighting. On a recent deployment to Afghanistan, my commander made the difficult decision to leave one of our 150-man companies at home station. The average person might have been relieved to avoid combat duty, but not these Rangers! Many were devastated. They all wanted to contribute to the fight.

One such warrior is Private First Class Luke Holtz. After his older brother Tyler was killed in Afghanistan with the Rangers in 2011, Luke volunteered to don the uniform and serve in the same unit. He wanted so badly to deploy and confront evil face to face, as Tyler had. In 2013, Luke got his wish and deployed to Logar Province, the area where his brother had fallen two years earlier. Luke said to me, "I'm only in the Rangers for a few years. I want to make the most of it!"

You want to make the most of your life, right? I do too, and here's my promise to you. As we grasp the truth of the Warrior Christ, we will understand what it means to be men and women of God. We'll find our real identity and purpose. When we follow the Warrior Christ, we will be set free from despair, darkness, and purposelessness in our marriages, families, churches, and communities,

and we will be used by God to set others free. Only a Warrior Christ can so positively impact this fractured planet.

In Ranger vernacular, Jesus was a badass.

Are you appalled at the use of that mildly irreverent term to describe the Son of God? Or is your heart stirred at the thought of Jesus being tough enough to merit that label? Warriors use that term, not as an insult, but as a badge of honor! If any soldier deserves that label, then Jesus does even more so.³

And we should want the same to be said of us. The church has plenty of lukewarm Christians who honor God with their lips but whose hearts are far from him (Matthew 15:8).

God is looking for true warriors who will trade all that this life offers for the privilege to take up arms and charge the field beside him in defiance of our great Enemy. Jesus referred to this aggressive and determined spirit:

The kingdom of heaven has been *forcefully advancing*, and *forceful men* lay hold of it. (Matthew 11:12, NIV)

Jesus certainly was that kind of forceful man. He calls us to vigorously advance his kingdom—as spiritual badasses—in our homes, communities, and world.

Ahead, you'll find action stories—from the Bible, history, my own life, and battle zones today. You'll find practical teaching on a way of life that works. You'll see Christ's mission of justice, mercy, and ultimately redemption unfold. You'll watch him overthrow the status quo, make all things new, and call you to be part of the mission.

You'll never read the Bible in the same way again. But more important than that, you'll never see your own role in life the same

way again. Why? Because the Warrior Christ's mission in the world did not end when he departed this earth to return to heaven. He's still working his will in a world plagued by evil and filled with great needs. And he's using ordinary people like you and me to complete this mission. So as you let yourself be drawn into the Warrior Christ's ongoing mission in the world, your life will take on meaning, worth, importance, excitement, and both higher risk and higher reward than you've ever experienced before.

Jesus didn't lead a wimpy life, as he has unfortunately been portrayed as doing. You don't need to lead a wimpy life either. In fact, Jesus is calling you to the exact opposite: a life that's bold, active, robust. He is enlisting men and women who are willing to enter enemy territory and (to quote the mission of the U.S. Army Infantry) to "close with and destroy" the evil in our world.

This is the story we were created to hear.

This is the mission we were designed to live.

The green light is on, my friend, and it's your turn to jump. It's time to enter the fight alongside the first and greatest Airborne Ranger.



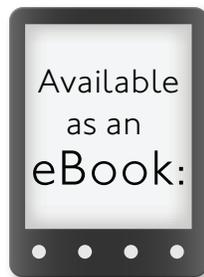
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