



# Finding God in the Mountains of Afghanistan

BY JOSHUA PENNIFIELD

I am Staff Sergeant Stache with the 101st Airborne, the Screaming Eagles. I'm far from the world I knew in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan. As a kid, I remember sitting in church, singing about faith the size of a mustard seed. It seemed so simple then. But in this endless war, that simplicity feels worlds away. The sun scorches, the cold bites, and every day is a battle – not just against an enemy, but within my heart and mind, grappling with faith amidst the chaos.

Back home, there's a life waiting for me. A loving wife who's as strong in her faith as she is beautiful, and two dogs that probably forgot how I look. I joined the army out of duty, believing every able American should serve their country. It's a tradition in my family, one I take pride in continuing. My dad served my grandpa, too. It was more than a choice; it was my calling.

Out here, every firefight is a dance with death. The mountains become a cacophony of gunfire and shouting, echoing with the fury of war. Bullets zip by, close enough to feel their heat, stirring up dust and fear. The air smells of gunpowder and sweat. In these moments, time warps; seconds stretch into eternities. You see the faces of your brothers etched with determination, fear, and resolve. Every sense heightens, attuned to the slightest movement,

the faintest sound. It's here, in this orchestrated chaos, that reality strips down to its rawest form.

I remember Jackson, always with a joke on his lips, even when the mortar shells fell like rain. And there was Rodriguez, young and earnest, clinging to a crumpled photo of his girl back home. They were more than my squad; they were my brothers. In their eyes, I saw reflections of my fears and hopes. With them, I wasn't just fighting a war but preserving a fragment of humanity.

During those long, cold nights, I'd stare at the stars, pondering. War, a relentless beast, strips away all pretenses, exposing raw souls. In this desolation, I questioned the divine plan. How could a benevolent God oversee such horror? Yet, in quiet moments of camaraderie, when laughter broke the tension, I saw flickers of something divine. Maybe God wasn't in the firefights but in the spaces between, in the resilience of the human spirit.

One dawn, amidst the rubble, I found a flower blooming—a defiant splash of color in a landscape of grey. It was absurd, almost offensive, how it dared to grow there. But in that small act of defiance, I saw a metaphor for my faith. If this fragile beauty could emerge amidst destruction, couldn't my belief withstand the trials of war?

In the quiet hours, doubts crept in like unwelcome shadows. I'd recall Sunday sermons, words about love and mercy, and find them at odds with the ruthless reality around me. Fear gripped me often—not just of dying, but of losing my soul in this turmoil. I yearned for a sign, a whisper to quell the storm inside. Yet, often, all I met was silence.

The Afghan landscape was a relentless teacher. Harsh, unyielding mountains stood as silent sentinels, witnessing our fleeting struggles. In their vastness, I felt my insignificance and, paradoxically, a connection to something greater. The crimson

sunsets painted the skies; the cold nights sharpened the stars. In their untamed beauty, I found a strange solace, a reminder that life, in all its forms, persists even in the bleakest places.

As my time here nears its end, I wonder about the life awaiting me. Will I be the same man who left those dogs and my knockout wife? This war has changed me and shaped me in ways I'm still understanding. I carry home not just memories but a faith reborn from adversity, as resilient as the mountains that bore witness to my transformation. Like that mustard seed, my faith – small, resilient – has found a way to grow in the rocky soil of war.