



by 2LT Oren Abusch and 1LT Jack Hadley

It's 0200. Our platoon Charlie 1 is struggling to establish a patrol base. We have just completed a seven kilometer night ruck march, over half of which involved carrying multiple (simulated) casualties. It's early April in Dahlonaga, GA, and the temperature dips into the low 40s. We're very tired. The Ranger Instructors (RIs) keep making us redo parts of the patrol base process. Finally, at 0400, the RIs tell us to eat dinner. At 0415 we go to sleep, with a wakeup scheduled for 0500.

At 0430, we wake up to one of the RIs firing off an unmanned machine gun, yelling.

“Is this how we maintain security, Rangers? Is this a joke? Security keeps your soldiers alive! Do you not care if your soldiers are killed in combat?” He lets his words sit there for a second, as our minds race to shake off the grogginess and understand what’s going on. He then accused us of purposely sabotaging security because we didn’t care. We were then told to stand up, with our gear ready, and wait for sunrise.

And so we stood there, as the sun slowly rose over the Appalachian mountains.

How do you prepare for such a moment? For the most part, you can’t. Many of the experiences of Ranger School must be lived to understand them. Yet during Ranger School the two of us found ourselves returning over and over to several books we had read before reporting. These books, four of which we discuss here, helped us understand the nature of the trainee-trainer relationship, remember that others before us had overcome the same (and worse) challenges, and – perhaps most importantly – some helped us find meaning on the hardest days.

### ***The Things They Carried*** by Tim O’Brien

This novel, along with [\*Starship Troopers\*](#) (see below), offers some of the best words and images to describe the soldiering experience at Ranger School – from the minutiae of packing lists to the nihilism brought on by the pain of carrying.

Comprised of a dozen-plus vignettes united by the author-character’s imaginative memory, this novel creatively describes the challenges of the Vietnam War. The specificity of the characters’ rucksack contents is relatable for Ranger Students. But the style prompts the realization that – at least for soldiers – what you carry is who you are: weapons, claymores, night-vision goggles; knives and lighters, rope and tape; lucky trinkets, letter-writing materials, and pictures of loved ones. And what you carry can change you. Heavy rucks can turn the toughest of Rangers into the whiniest of children. Just as some characters in the book are crushed by the things they carry – physically, emotionally and morally – Ranger

students fight for sanity and meaning under their heavy loads.

The heaviest thing the book's characters carry is the psychological burden of war: killing, being killed, and the uncertainty and injustice of it all. Ranger School, while very different from combat, still places upon its students a heavy psychological burden. This is the burden of working towards a tab – constantly fearing the physical demands, recycling, or even getting dropped from the course, and never feeling close enough to graduation. The strong parallels between the book and Ranger School make this a great book for anyone preparing to physically or mentally carry a lot of weight.

### ***Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*** by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Have you ever sought comfort or escape under the weight of a soul-crushing rucksack by 'turning your brain off'? The idea of turning our brains off to endure pain and boredom is a common coping mechanism.

This book turns that idea upside down. Nearly every moment of sucking through Ranger Assessment Phase ('RAP Week'), struggling up the side of a massive mountain, or anxiously awaiting our graded patrols we would fight for 'flow.' That *optimal experience* of feeling in the zone, when we forget everything outside our cone of focus and lose track of time. Flow is strongest when an appropriately difficult challenge is met with skill. Thus, when challenges are too great (leading to anxiety), or too small (leading to boredom), an individual must either creatively reframe his circumstances or adapt his skill level to the current challenges he faces. The author gives interesting and surprising recommendations for creating mental stimulation in dull situations and for simplifying complexity to reduce anxiety.

We employed strategies and played games with ourselves throughout Ranger School to counter anxiety and boredom, constantly seeking to move our minds towards "flow." When crushed by the weight of my mountains-phase ruck, I (Jack) would play counting games, sing

Hamilton, or work on travel plans to Eastern Europe for next summer. When bored, I (Oren) would make lists of cities around the world to visit, design delicious dessert recipes (ask me about the Merrill's Manwich...), or write poetry. In all scenarios, we came closer to flow not by turning our brains off, but by turning them on. If you're looking for tangible skills and helpful concepts that will improve the quality of your mental life during Ranger School, this book is an excellent choice.

### **Memoir and Biographies by Robert Caro: *Working, The Path to Power, The Power Broker***

When Ranger graduates describe the horrible or ridiculous moments of Ranger School, something implicit in their stories is the feeling of powerlessness. First, there is the powerlessness of a Ranger before the weather. Second is the terrain. Secret swamps in Darby, thousand-foot mountains, and Florida's thick, wet vegetation all exert great power over Rangers' minds and bodies.

Third, there are the RIs. The power dynamic between RIs and students is equally unbalanced. Anyone who controls how much sleep you get has great power. And even though there are rules for calorie intake and grading standards, the hungry Ranger student pursuing his "go" feels (and often is) entirely subordinate to the mood and personality of the RI.

And finally, the most complex power dynamic exists among the Ranger students themselves. Graded squad leaders unable to coax tired team leaders to do their jobs; mapless Soldiers unsure how much further they have left to walk; squadmates ruthlessly peering out one another for unclear reasons and then lying about it. You can have all the tactical competence, natural charisma, and Ranger-school-hacks in the world, but few Rangers ever feel powerful or empowered.

We both heard ourselves using the language of power frequently when describing our

experiences, both during Ranger School and since. Identifying our frustrations as symptoms of powerlessness gave us better mental poise in dealing with weather and terrain. We replaced unproductive whining at RIs' unfair decisions with a genuine fascination at the various ways RIs wielded their power. We gained a sense of power by coming to understand that even the most seemingly pointless actions were intentionally done in order to see how we would respond to the induced stress. The language of power also gave us tools for working with our squads - knowing who knew what, knowing when to shut up and when to speak up, knowing how to concede power and when to take it.

These thoughts on power largely come from our reading of biographer Robert Caro. Caro's selection criteria for the subjects of his two Pulitzer Prize-winning biographies on Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert Moses, was simply that he thought they wielded more power, more effectively than anyone else in modern American history. By studying these giants of history, Caro established himself as a world-class expert on the subject of power. If you can only make time for one Caro book before Ranger School, read Caro's 2019 memoir [Working](#). It's by far his shortest and will give you many tools for thinking about power during Ranger School. If you want more, start [his Lyndon B. Johnson series](#). And then if you're still hungry, move onto [The Power Broker](#) about Robert Moses.

### ***Starship Troopers* by Robert Heinlein**

*Starship Troopers* follows Johnnie Rico, in a fictional future world, from when he joins the mobile infantry, through his training, and into combat. While this book is science fiction, it explains the experience of training better than any other book we have read.

For example, Heinlein understands the pain of weather. His description of freezing soldiers standing in huddled masses, moving towards the center of the huddle for warmth—yet avoiding “others leaning on them and their halitosis”—will sound familiar to any winter Ranger. He even captures the frustrating reality that “while weather seems important at the moment, it seems rather dull to look back upon.” If you ask someone about their worst day

in Ranger school, you can almost guarantee they will mention the weather. Yet, their inclusion of weather in their story feels dull compared to its original, painful vividness. Heinlein's insight is astounding.

Ranger students can also strongly relate to the mental challenges Rico faces from his trainers and the training. Just as Rico's trainers constantly remind him that he can quit at any time and be transferred to another branch, RIs entice students into quitting during RAP week with promises of hot meals and whispers of comfortable beds and freedom. Anxious Rangers can find solidarity in Rico's constant concern that he could be dropped from the training at any time. Finally, and most relevant to Ranger School, Heinlein captures the mental struggle of maintaining discipline during simulated combat, where no actual lives are at stake. This despite the fact that RIs will time and time again tell ranger students to "treat it like it's real."

*Starship Troopers* gives voice to the suck of Ranger school. It may be about futuristic soldiers with hand-held nuclear weapons, but it embodies the feelings of the cold, wet, hungry, and tired Ranger.

### **Prepare your body AND your mind**

You cannot fully prepare for Ranger School. The point of the course is to take you past your physical, mental, and emotional limits, into uncharted territory where you must learn to perform and lead effectively. While you can never be fully ready, you can certainly prepare as much as possible. Just as there are dozens of pre-ranger fitness plans, we hope this article serves as a helpful pre-ranger reading guide; a guide for understanding the experience of Ranger School and, more importantly, for understanding yourself.

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