

# **The Polaris Protocol**

Also by Brad Taylor

One Rough Man

All Necessary Force

Enemy of Mine

The Widow's Strike

# **The Polaris Protocol**

A Pike Logan Thriller

Brad Taylor

Dutton

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Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Group (USA) LLC  
375 Hudson Street  
New York, New York 10014, USA

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USA / Canada / UK / Ireland / Australia  
New Zealand / India / South Africa / China  
penguin.com  
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<Dutton logo> REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA  
has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-525-95397-5

Printed in the United States of America  
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Set in TK  
Designed by TK

**PUBLISHER'S NOTE**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

“ . . . Civil GPS receivers are built deeply into our national infrastructure: from our smartphones to our cars to the Internet to the power grid to our banking and finance institutions. Some call GPS the invisible utility: it works silently, and for the most part perfectly reliably, in devices all around us—devices of which we are scarcely aware.”

Dr. Todd Humphreys, statement to the House Committee on Homeland Security

“His story is about power, but he is never really in control . . . His world is not as imagined in novels and films. He is always the man who comes and takes you and tortures you and kills you. But still, he is always worried, because his work stands on a floor of uncertainty. Alliances shift, colleagues vanish—sometimes because he murders them—and he seldom knows what is really going on. He catches only glimpses from the battlefield.”

Molly Molloy and Charles Bowden, *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin*.



## Chapter 1

December, 2011

Sergeant Ronald Blackmar never heard the round before it hit, but registered the whine of a ricochet right next to his head and felt the sliver of rock slice into his cheek. He slammed lower behind the outcropping and felt his face, seeing blood on his assault gloves. His platoon leader, First Lieutenant Blake Alberty, threw himself into the prone and said with black humor, “You get our asses out of here, and I’ll get you another purple heart.”

Blackmar said, “I’ve got nothing else to work with. The eighty-ones won’t reach and the Apaches are dry.”

Another stream of incoming machine-gun fire raked their position, and Alberty returned it, saying, “We’re in trouble. And I’m not going to be the next COP Keating.”

Both from the 25th Infantry Division, they were part of a string of Combat Outposts in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan, ostensibly designed to prevent the infiltration of Taliban fighters from the nearby border of Pakistan, but in reality a giant bulls eye for anyone wanting a scalp. They were attacked at the COP on a daily basis, but followed orders, continuing their patrols to the nearby villages in an effort to get the locals on the government side.

The mountains of the Kunar province were extreme, and afforded the Taliban an edge, putting the Americans on equal terms. Everything was done on foot, as the mountains negated artillery, leaving the troops reliant on helicopter gunship support. The same thing COP Keating had relied on when it was overrun two years before.

The incoming fire grew in strength, and Alberty began receiving reports of casualties. They were

on their own, and about to be overrun. A trophy for the Taliban. Blackmar heard the platoon designated marksmen firing, their rifles' individual cracks distinctive among the rattle of automatic fire, and felt impotent.

As the forward observer, his entire career had been to provide steel on target for the Infantry he supported. He was the man they turned to when they wanted American firepower, and now he had nothing to provide, his radio silent.

Alberty shouted, "They're flanking, they're flanking! We need the gunships."

Blackmar was about to reply when his radio squawked. "Kilo Seven-Nine, this is Texas Thirteen. You have targets?"

He said, "Yes, yes. What's your ordinance?"

"Five hundred pound GBU."

*GBU? A fast mover with JDAMs?*

He said, "What's your heading?"

The pilot said, "Don't worry about it. I'm a BUFF. Way above you."

Blackmar heard the words, and couldn't believe it. He'd called in everything from 81-millimeter mortars to F15 strike aircraft, but he'd never called fire from a B-52 stratofortress. Not that it mattered, as the five-hundred pound JDAM was guided by GPS.

He lased the Taliban position for range, shacked up his coordinates, and sent the fire request. The pilot reported bombs out, asking for a splash. He kept his eyes on the enemy, waiting. Nothing happened.

Alberty screamed, "You hit the village, you hit the village. Shift, shift."

*The village? That damn thing is seven hundred meters away.*

He checked his location and lased again, now plotting the impact danger close as the enemy advanced. He repeated the call with the new coordinates, and waited for the splash.

Alberty shouted again, "You're pounding the fucking village! Get the rounds on target, damn it."



Blackmar frantically checked his map and his range, shouting back, “I’m right. I’m on target. The bombs aren’t tracking.”

The volume of enemy fire increased, and Alberty began maneuvering his forces, forgetting about the firepower circling at 30,000 feet. Blackmar called for another salvo, recalculating yet again. No ordinance impacted the enemy. Thirty minutes later, the American’s superior firepower meant nothing, as the fight went hand-to-hand.

Captain “Tiny” Shackelford noticed the first glitch when the coordinates on his screen showed the RQ-107 unmanned aerial vehicle a hundred miles away from the designated flight path. Which, given his target area over Iran’s nuclear facilities, was a significant problem.

Flying the drone from inside Tonapah airbase, Nevada, he felt a rush of adrenaline as if he were still in the cockpit of an F-16 over enemy airspace and his early warning sensors had triggered a threat. He called an alert, saying he had an issue, then realized he’d lost link with the UAV. He began working the problem, trying to prevent the drone from going into autopilot and landing, while the CIA owners went into overdrive.

The RQ-107 was a new stealth UAV, the latest and greatest evolution of unmanned reconnaissance, and as such, it was used out of Afghanistan to probe the nuclear ambitions of Iran. It had proven the ability to fly above the Persian state with impunity, and was a major link to the intelligence community on Iranian intentions. Losing one inside Iranian airspace would be a disaster. An army of technicians went to work, a modern day version of Apollo Thirteen.

They failed.

Mark Oglethorpe, the United States Secretary of Defense, said, “We’ve had forty-two confirmed GPS failures. We’ve identified the glitch, and it’s repaired, but we lost a UAV inside Iran because of it.”

Alexander Palmer, the National Security advisor, said, “Glitch? I’d say it’s more than a glitch.

What happened?"

"The new AEP system of the GPS constellation had a software/hardware mating problem. It's something that the contractor couldn't see beforehand."

"Bullshit. It's something they *failed* to see. Did it affect the civilian systems? Am I going to hear about this from Transportation?"

"No. Only the military signal, but you're definitely going to hear about it from the Iranians. They're already claiming they brought our bird down."

Palmer rubbed his forehead, thinking about what to brief the president. "I don't give a damn. They got the drone, and that's going to be a fact on tomorrow's news. Let'em crow."

"You want to allow them the propaganda of saying they can capture our most sophisticated UAV? We'll look like idiots."

"Someone *is* an idiot. But I'd rather the world wonder about the Iranian statements."

"As opposed to what?"

"The fucking truth, that's what."

## Chapter 2

Present Day

Joshua Bryant saw the seatbelt light flash and knew they had just broken through ten thousand feet. Time to shut off his iPod, but more importantly, it was his turn in the window seat.

Only fifteen years old, his passion in life was airplanes and his singular goal was to become a pilot—unlike his younger sister, who only wanted the window to aggravate him. She'd complained as they had boarded, and his mother had split the difference. She got the window for takeoff, and he got it for landing.

“Mom, we're coming into final approach and it's my turn.”

His sister immediately responded, “No we're not! He's just talking like he knows what's going on.”

Joshua started to reply when the pilot came over the intercom, telling them they had about ten more minutes before parking at their gate in Denver. Joshua smiled instead, just to annoy her. She grouched a little more, but gave up her seat.

After buckling up, he pressed his face against the glass, looking towards the wing jutting out three rows up, watching the flaps getting manipulated by the pilot. The aircraft continued its approach and he saw the distinctive swastika shape of Denver International Airport.

A flight attendant came by checking seat belts at a leisurely pace, then another rushed up and whispered in her ear. They both speed-walked in the direction of the cockpit, the original flight attendant's face pale.

Joshua didn't give it much thought, returning his attention to the window. He placed his hands on either side of his face to block the glare, and began scanning. On the ground below he saw a small

private plane taxiing. With as much conscious thought as someone recognizing a vegetable, he knew it was a Cessna 182.

The Boeing 757 continued to descend and began to overtake the Cessna. Strangely, the Cessna continued taxiing. With a start, Joshua realized it had taken off, directly underneath them. He watched it rise in slow motion, closing the distance to their fragile airship.

He turned from the window and screamed, “Plane! An airplane!”

His mother said, “What?”

The Cessna collided with the left wing just outside the engine, a jarring bump as if the 757 had hit a pocket of turbulent air. Passengers began to murmur and whip their heads left and right, looking for someone to explain what had happened.

Twenty feet of wing sheared off as the Cessna chewed through the metal like a buzzsaw, exploding in a spectacular spray of metal confetti, followed by a fuel-air ball of fire.

Joshua knew the wing would no longer provide lift. Knew they were all dead.

He was the first to scream.

The aircraft yawed to the left, seeming to hang in the air for the briefest of moments, then began to plummet to earth sideways. The rest of the passengers joined Joshua, screaming maniacally, as if that would have any effect on the outcome.

The fuselage picked up speed and began to spin, the centrifugal force slapping the passengers about, one minute right side up, the next upside down, filling the cabin with flying debris.

Four seconds later, the screams of all one hundred and eighty seven souls ceased at the exact same moment.

## Chapter 3

Four Days Ago

“They’re here. I just heard the door open and close.”

Even though the door in question was the adjacent hotel room, the man whispered as if they could hear him as clearly as he could them.

“Jack, for the last time, as your editor, this is crazy.”

“You didn’t say that when I began.”

“That was before you started playing G. Gordon Liddy at the Watergate!”

Jack heard voices out of the small speaker on the desk and said, “I gotta go. Stay near your phone in case I need help.”

He heard “Jack—”, but ended the call without responding.

He checked to make sure the digital recorder was working, then leaned in, waiting on someone to appear on the small screen. The thin spy camera had slipped out of position just a bit, making the room look tilted.

A hefty Caucasian sat down in view, wearing jeans and a polo shirt that was a size too small. *The contact.*

Another man began speaking off camera, in flawless English with a slight Spanish accent, which, given what Jack was investigating, was to be expected. The words, however, were not. Nothing the man said had anything to do with the drug cartels or America. It was all about technology.

Eventually, the contact spoke. Jack leaned in, willing him to say what he wanted to hear. Wanting to believe his insane risk had been worth it.

He, also, said not a word about drugs, but blathered on about the right of the masses to digital technology, and the developed world governments' undying interest in monopolizing information.

Jack rubbed his eyes. *What the hell is this all about? Who gives a shit about information flow?*

The guy sounded like an anarchist, not a connection for the expansion of the Sinaloa drug cartel into America. The contact droned on about his ability to free up information, then said something that caused Jack to perk up. He mentioned the U.S. Air Force in Colorado Springs.

*Now we're getting somewhere.*

Colorado Springs was just outside Denver, and was the American crossroad for the drug corridor leading out of El Paso, passing right by the hotel he was now in. Straight up U.S. Interstate 10/25, the corridor branched left and right at Colorado Springs, into the heartland of the United States. The future fighting ground he was trying to prove was coming.

Jack leaned in, straining to catch every word, but most had nothing to do with drugs, or Mexico, or anything else he was investigating. He sat back, disgusted and angry he'd paid the informant that led him to this meeting. Angry at the risk he had taken. Something bad was going on, but it wasn't anything he cared about.

*Wasted money. Wasted time.*

Through the speaker, he heard the door open again, not really listening anymore, cataloguing how he could reconnect with his sources and informants. Trying to figure out how he could get back on the pulse of his story.

A voice in Spanish splayed out, begging for mercy. The sound punctured his thoughts, not because of the words, but because of the terror, the cheap acoustics doing nothing to mask the dread. Jack stared at the screen, but the man remained outside the scope of the lens. He begged for his life, the fear seeping through like blood from a wound. On camera, the American contact had his hands in the air, his mouth slack, clearly unsure what was going on. Jack heard his own name, and felt terror wash over him like an acid bath.

*Jesus Christ. It's the desk clerk. He's sold me out.*

He slammed the lid to the digital recorder closed and shoved it under the bed, then grabbed the speaker and yanked it out of its connection to the wireless receiver. He threw it in the bathroom, then fumbled for his phone, his hands shaking, looking for a way out that wasn't the door. He realized there was none. Realized he'd made a catastrophic mistake.

He pulled up speed-dial and hit a button. The phone went straight to voice mail. He shouted, "Andy, Andy, I'm in trouble. I'm in big trouble. Where the fuck are you?"

The door burst open and he remained standing, the phone trembling in his hand. Two men entered, both pointing pistols at him. He shouted "No, no, no!", throwing his arms into the air. One snarled in Spanish, and he feigned ignorance. The other said in English, "Get on your knees. Now."

He did so, the fear so great he thought he would pass out. He'd studied the Mexican drug cartels for over four years, seeing the savagery they would inflict on those who attempted to thwart them, and in no way did he want to provoke their ire anymore than he had.

They handcuffed him with efficiency, no outward abuse, no punches or smacking just because they could, which did nothing but raise his alarm. They weren't local thugs. They were trained, and had done this many times before. He began calculating what he could do. How long he had. He knew they wouldn't kill him here, in El Paso. The drug trade was vicious. Violent beyond the average human's comprehension, but it still wasn't here. They'd move him, which meant some time. At least a day while they tried to get him across the border, to Ciudad Juarez, where they could torture him freely.

One day. Twenty-four hours. He looked at his watch and saw the seconds begin to disappear.