



MISSION:MAN

LIFE LESSONS
FROM A
CIA OPERATIVE

B.D. FOLEY

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**PLAIN SIGHT
PUBLISHING**

An Imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc.
Springville, Utah

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ISBN 13: 978-1-4621-2701-6

Published by Plain Sight Publishing, an imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc.

2373 W. 700 S., Springville, UT 84663

Distributed by Cedar Fort, Inc., www.cedarfort.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Foley, B. D. (Brent Durwood), 1958- author.

Title: Mission man : life lessons from a CIA operative / B.D. Foley.

Description: Springville, Utah : Plain Sight Publishing, An imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc., [2016] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016030603 (print) | LCCN 2016033185 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781462119202 (perfect bound : alk. paper) | ISBN

9781462127016 (epub, pdf, mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Foley, B. D. (Brent Durwood), 1958- | Intelligence officers--Biography. | LCGFT: Autobiographies. | Humor. | Anecdotes.

Classification: LCC JK468.I6 F65 2016 (print) | LCC JK468.I6 (ebook) | DDC 327.12730092 [B] --dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016030603>

Cover design by Kinsey Beckett

Cover design © 2016 by Cedar Fort, Inc.

Edited and typeset by Jennifer Johnson

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About the Author

1: BAD BOYS

I began my life as a bad boy. I admit that I was bad, despite what my mom thought of me and all her best efforts. You see, a mom sees the good in boys and little else. A dad, on the other hand, sees the bad and hopes for some good someday. Yep, dads know the truth. They know because they were bad boys too, when they were younger. Many still are.

I blame some of my badness—not all of it—on fire, or my attraction to it. Fire is as tempting as can be to a boy. Who hasn't sat next to a campfire, staring into the flames, hypnotized by the shifting shapes, the magic? Fire moves and flickers like a living, breathing creature, dancing along a wooden stage in multicolored costumes. It is chameleon-like as well, changing moods with each match, moving revelers with patriotic fireworks, thrilling an audience during a Vegas show, or warming children after a cold swim in the lake like a mother, drying their clothes and roasting their marshmallows.

Unfortunately, fire can also be a monster, a cruel tool of destruction. Boys can use it to destroy. Why a boy likes to destroy, I don't know. I just know that we do. Boys love blowing up mailboxes with M-80 firecrackers, chopping down trees, throwing rocks through windows of abandoned buildings, rolling boulders off thousand-foot cliffs, smashing bottles with rocks. Boys love to destroy; it seems to bring us joy.

Boys also love to shoot. What could be better than shooting a round from a high-powered rifle through a TV or microwave packed with Tannerite explosives? I'll tell you what could be better: shooting it with a grenade launcher, or a .50 caliber machine gun, or a Rocket Propelled

Grenade (RPG), or a MANPAD (Man-Portable Air Defense System). Even that word, MANPAD, sounds manly. We love to shoot with larger and larger calibers, more rounds per minute, the bigger the better, overkill. That's why they call it *firepower*. To a boy, a rifle is the original joystick. Actually, to shoot is a hoot.

Boys love to crush: watermelons stolen from a farmer's field, vehicles in those huge car crushers at junkyards, monster trucks that drive over other vehicles, a bowling ball in a hydraulic press, an egg on a friend's head, or even a soda can on our own head. To crush is a rush.

But boys especially love fire, our favorite, trusted accomplice. We torch old timber mills during Boy Scout camps and watch the flames explode thirty feet in the air. We don't particularly love being scolded by the Scoutmaster, nor being ordered to sit at the "fireside" all night to ensure that the fire does not spread, but it's still worth it. We love matches, fire starters, lighters, torches, and even better—flamethrowers. My brothers and I fought over the GI Joe flamethrower action figure. Of course, a real flamethrower would have been even better, but they were hard to find for a boy of eight, fortunately. Yes, boys love to burn. Actually, we yearn to burn.

Okay, enough with the rhymes.

My love for fire was consummated, you might say, at an early age. One fine summer morning a friend of mine, Michael McFarren, confided that he had taken the key to a neighbor's home. The owners, the Dahls, had entrusted the key to Michael's parents, hoping they would care for the plants while they were away at Disneyland, and ignoring the fact that the McFarrens had a five-year-old pyromaniac son (is that redundant?) who played with a five-year-old pyromaniac friend, both of whom might try to burn their home to the ground. Did the thought that the Dahls were off vacationing in Disneyland, enjoying rides, hot dogs, and fluffy hotel towels, while we wandered our empty street with nothing to do, enter our juvenile minds and spur us to torch their home? Maybe. I don't recall any particular antipathy for them but merely sympathy for fire.

After we entered their home, we headed directly to the kitchen, where we searched the pantry. I first spotted saltine crackers on a shelf and grabbed

the box. I have always loved saltine crackers, almost as much as fire. These were simpler times, before Cheez-Its; saltine crackers were the treat of the time. Michael and I tore into them like starving orphan boys, relishing our temporary independence and especially the freedom from nagging mothers: “Don’t eat so fast,” “Take one at a time,” or “Close your mouth while you are chewing!”

As we laughed and chewed with our mouths wide open, I spied a box of wooden matches sitting on another shelf. These were not the wimpy restaurant matches, but wooden matches, matches to die for. They might as well have been calling to us from their package, “Yeah, baby, you see us! You remember us, the magic matches?! Let’s do this!” Just as there was no mom to tell us to eat one cracker at a time, there was no mom to stop us from playing with those beautiful, voluptuous, wooden matches. Did I just say voluptuous? Well, that is how they looked to Michael and me at the time.

We quickly gathered up as many paper scraps, utility bills, cardboard pieces, and wooden objects as we could find and stacked them all in the center of the living room floor. We then each took a match, but as I lifted my match to strike it on the box, Michael grabbed me by the arm and said, “Wait! Let’s make a star pattern on the carpet!” He then crouched down and arranged the pile, and more matches, in beautiful, delicate “rays” extending from the center outward. We then lit the fire. It wasn’t long before the flames were melting the beautiful beige carpet and slowly spreading to the walls of the home. Destruction, yes, but with style.

As the fire grew, we began to dance around the flames in ecstasy, laughing, still stuffing our faces with crackers, spitting crumbs at each other. We were transported through time and transformed into cave boys, like our ancestors eons ago—eating, dancing, chanting, and burning. We were mesmerized by our creation, a glowing, magical pet that was slowly devouring the carpet and leaving a black, charred trail in its wake.

If we had not lit candles and placed them on the windowsills, my mother might not have found me. I imagine that the smoke billowing out the front door was also a clue to our whereabouts. Leaving the front door open was a fortunate mistake that ultimately cost us our pride but probably saved our

lives. My mother soon had me by one ear, escorting me home on my tiptoes, most assuredly beginning to notice some signs of badness.

At age five, I was thinking only that my ear hurt, and that I needed to dispose of the rifle ammunition that I had found in Mr. Dahl's bedroom, next to his .30-06 hunting rifle. I had tried to load the gun during a break from the fire—which would have escalated our adventure, enabling us to burn, eat, and shoot at the same time—but eventually gave up and loaded my pockets instead. Even at five, I knew that I had to get rid of any evidence, so I stealthily dropped the finger-length rounds in front yards leading to our home. My mom did not notice a thing; I was that good, and that bad.

I suppose their insurance paid for the damage. I don't remember having to work it off, which would have taken years. I remember that the Dahls eventually forgave me. We even went on a family vacation together, camping with them at Arches National Park, near Moab, Utah. They did not put me in charge of the campfire. Burn me once, flame on you, burn me twice ...

When I was not burning, I was flooding. Flooding can be loads of fun. Boys love a flood, with lots of mud. Okay, that's the last rhyme, I promise.

I'll tell you about flooding.

Our street, called Mandan Avenue—though it wasn't really an avenue at all—was the last outpost between suburban Salt Lake City streets and neighboring farms. Those of us unable to go to Disneyland (which meant most of the neighborhood) would often explore the nearby fields and trails, catch snakes, and play in the irrigation ditches. One ditch we visited regularly was affectionately called "Poop Creek," a half-misnomer since it was not much of a creek but did smell a lot like poop. It was located a bit farther away from home and, as one can surmise from the name, wasn't really worth the walk.

Snake Trail, which did have snakes, followed one of the ditches closer to our street and led to a small grove of poplars along the edge of a sugar beet field. To my friends and me, this field, which ran north and south along the eastern end of Mandan, served as playground, battleground, and highway

to neighborhoods farther away. We regularly marched back and forth, cutting trail and not showing much concern for the beets.

All that crisscrossing through the field couldn't have done the beets much good. And that couldn't have made the farmer very happy—the farmer named Ramón.

We didn't know much about Ramón. We just knew that he was big. Everything about him was big, from his big cowboy boots to his big baby-blue Cadillac. We saw him on rare occasions when he would drive up to the edge of his field to check his beets—and do whatever beet farmers do—and then leave. Our childish imaginations filled in anything else we needed to know about Ramón: that he was meaner than a snake, and that if he saw you step on one of his beets, he would stick you in the trunk of his Cadillac, drive you out to the Salt Flats, stake you out on a red ant hill, and leave you to die. The very mention of Ramón's name sent shivers up our spines. He was the Mandan bogeyman.

One summer day, my friends David and Reuel and I did not have any matches and could therefore not burn anything, so we decided to dam up the ditch next to Snake Trail to make a swimming hole. It was hot and well before the days of swimming pools in every gated community, which our neighborhood was not. We gathered rocks, sticks, and mud—whatever we could find—and made our own pool, one that any beaver would have been proud to call his own. We were soon lying on our backs in the cool water, squinting up at the sunlight filtering through the leaves and discussing who was hotter: Ginger or Mary Ann, Veronica or Betty? And Jeannie? That was quite an outfit. I am sure that boys today have similar arguments, but with different contestants.

As we argued, two things escaped our attention, which often happens when boys discuss hotness. First, our beaver dam was too effective, and all that backed up water was overflowing out one side of our pool and pouring into the sugar beet field—the field of Ramón. Second, Ramón had decided to come to this field on this particular day, at this particular time, and had seen the water flooding his precious sugar beets. In fact, he was at this very instant driving his vehicle, the baby-blue Cadillac of Ramón, along the edge

of the field, spinning his tires in the dirt, digging up his own beets. He was that mad.

The miracle of the human mind: drawing conclusions in split seconds. All three of our undeveloped but blossoming brains booted up in unison as we saw the Cadillac roll to a stop and Ramón's big boots appear beneath the door as he stepped out. We knew, as all beavers do, what a predator looks like. We exploded from the water in unison, jumped to our feet, and began to run. None of us spoke Spanish, but Ramón's words sounded like a swarm of angry bees as he ran toward us.

We wisely decided not to wait around for a translation and headed for home, which happened to be on the other side of his field.

At first, we tried not to step on his precious beets, but home was north and his rows ran east and west. Our strides were soon making salad of the tops of his beets. As we glanced back, we noticed that even Ramón did not appear concerned that his boots were also damaging crops since he followed our same route, slicing through the remaining plants that we hadn't damaged. We also noticed, with alarm, that he was surprisingly fast and agile in those big boots. And he was closing on us quickly. There is a joke about two men, walking on safari in the Serengeti, who spot a lion stalking them. One of them immediately sits down and begins to tie on his running shoes. His companion scoffs and remarks, "You're crazy if you think that you can run faster than a lion." The other chuckles and replies, "I don't have to run faster than the lion; I just have to run faster than you."

In hindsight, I don't think that any of us could have outrun that angry farmer, even in our adrenaline-induced panic. But I didn't have to run faster than Ramón—I just had to run faster than David. And on that fateful day in that sugar beet field, running from Ramón, we three friends learned the meaning of the expression, "every man for himself."

Don't get me wrong, as Ramón began to close in on David, and as bad a boy as I was, I did feel sorry for him. I even pictured David in my mind, a poor boy out in the Salt Flats, abandoned, thirsty, staked out on an anthill in his tighty-whiteys, calling for us in a weak, parched voice, "Help me." The thought was heartbreaking, as you might imagine. But I ignored the

voice, of course, and kept running. I am sure that Reuel, who was not as bad as me, felt some compassion, but he didn't stop and wait for David either. I'm sure he had the same thought racing through his mind: "We can't save him, so why not put as much distance between David and ourselves as possible?"

Ramón picked David out of the herd, like any good predator, and began to close in. After a few rows, Ramón eventually caught up to David and kicked him in the seat of the pants with one of those huge boots. When boot connected with butt, David achieved liftoff. And that's when something amazing happened. Have you ever seen one of those long jumpers at a track meet, sprinting down the track, hitting that white board, springing into the air, and then continuing to run mid-flight, pumping arms and legs, defying gravity? David did that! He just kept pumping those chubby little legs, flailing his chubby little arms, and never missed a step when he landed a couple of beet rows later, both feet on the ground. That is most likely when the phrase "he hit the ground running" was born.

I think that Ramón must have been impressed with David's agility and distance, since he stopped chasing us—either that or he was satisfied that he had made contact. Regardless, Ramón shouted one last threat in Spanish as we disappeared into a backyard—which I have since translated: "If I ever catch you little gringos in my beet field again, I will hang you from a tree like a piñata at my next birthday and let my relatives beat you"—something to that effect.

I do not remember ever seeing Ramón after that, or making another dam, or ever playing anywhere near his sugar beets again. And I stopped burning homes, flooding fields, and blowing stuff up, except during those years in the CIA. If you are going to keep burning, flooding, blowing stuff up, and being bad as you grow older, then at least get paid for it.

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