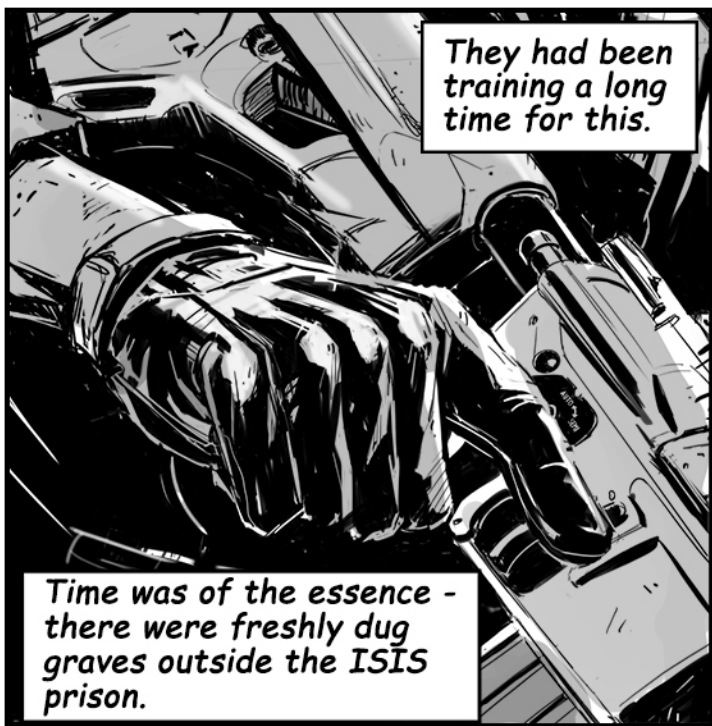


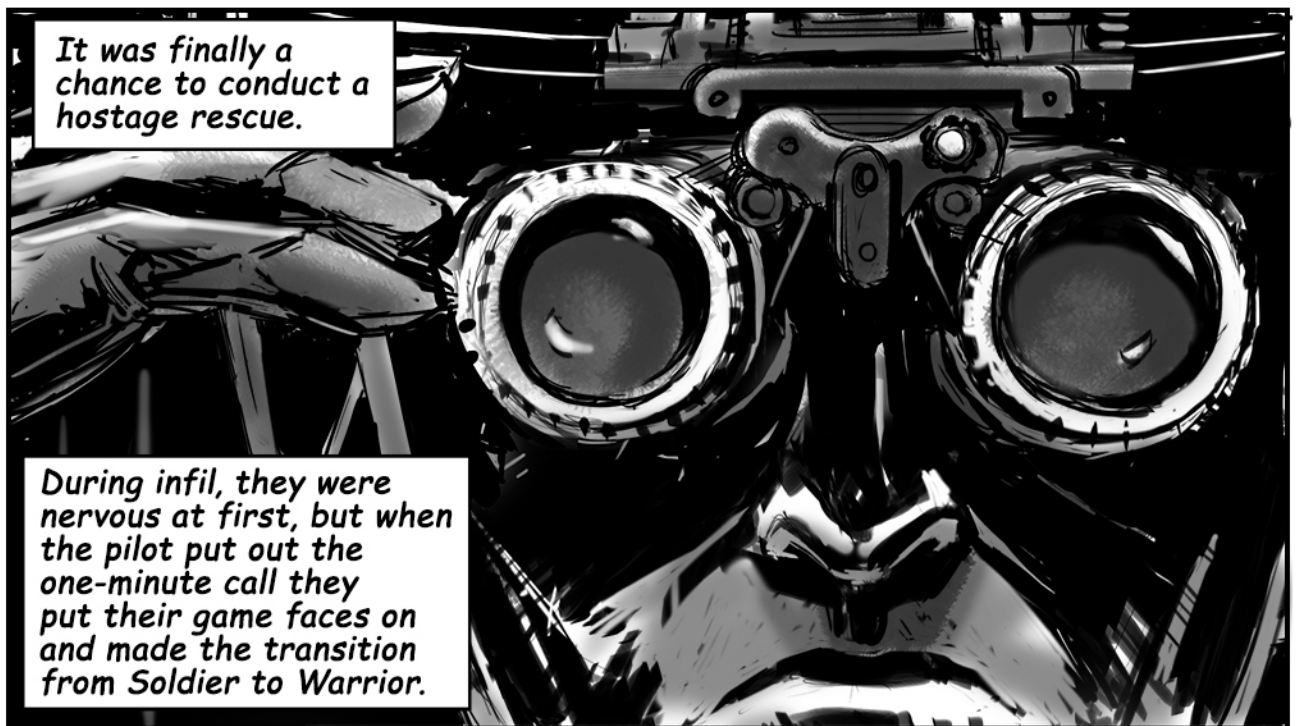


The Joint Task Force was staged in Erbil, Iraq. When they got the green light, the force loaded up on helicopters to infiltrate the objective. SFC Payne was the chalk leader aboard one of the CH-47 helicopters.



They had been training a long time for this.

Time was of the essence - there were freshly dug graves outside the ISIS prison.



It was finally a chance to conduct a hostage rescue.

During infil, they were nervous at first, but when the pilot put out the one-minute call they put their game faces on and made the transition from Soldier to Warrior.

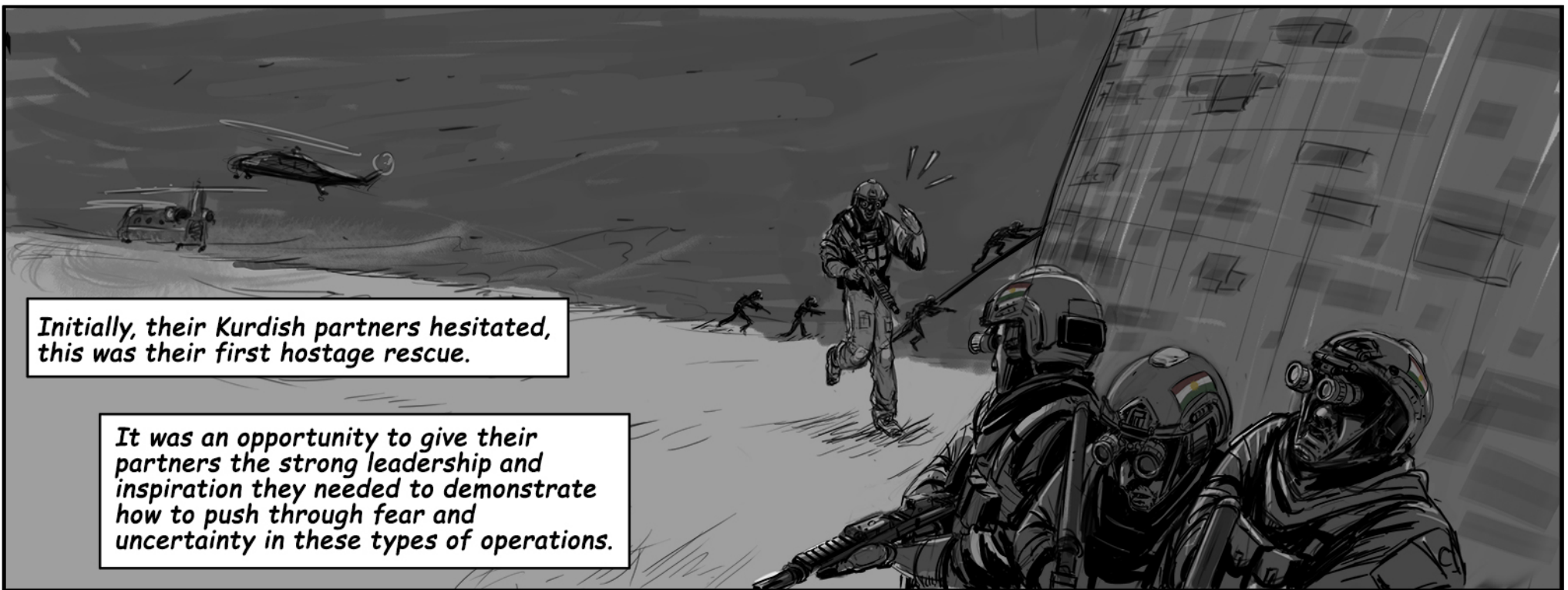


When the ramp dropped, that's when their training kicked in and they fed off each other's courage.

Once their boots hit the ground it was a complete brownout. There was dust and smoke everywhere, and they were in a pretty fierce firefight right off the bat.



They maneuvered to the compound and put their ladders up.



Initially, their Kurdish partners hesitated, this was their first hostage rescue.

It was an opportunity to give their partners the strong leadership and inspiration they needed to demonstrate how to push through fear and uncertainty in these types of operations.

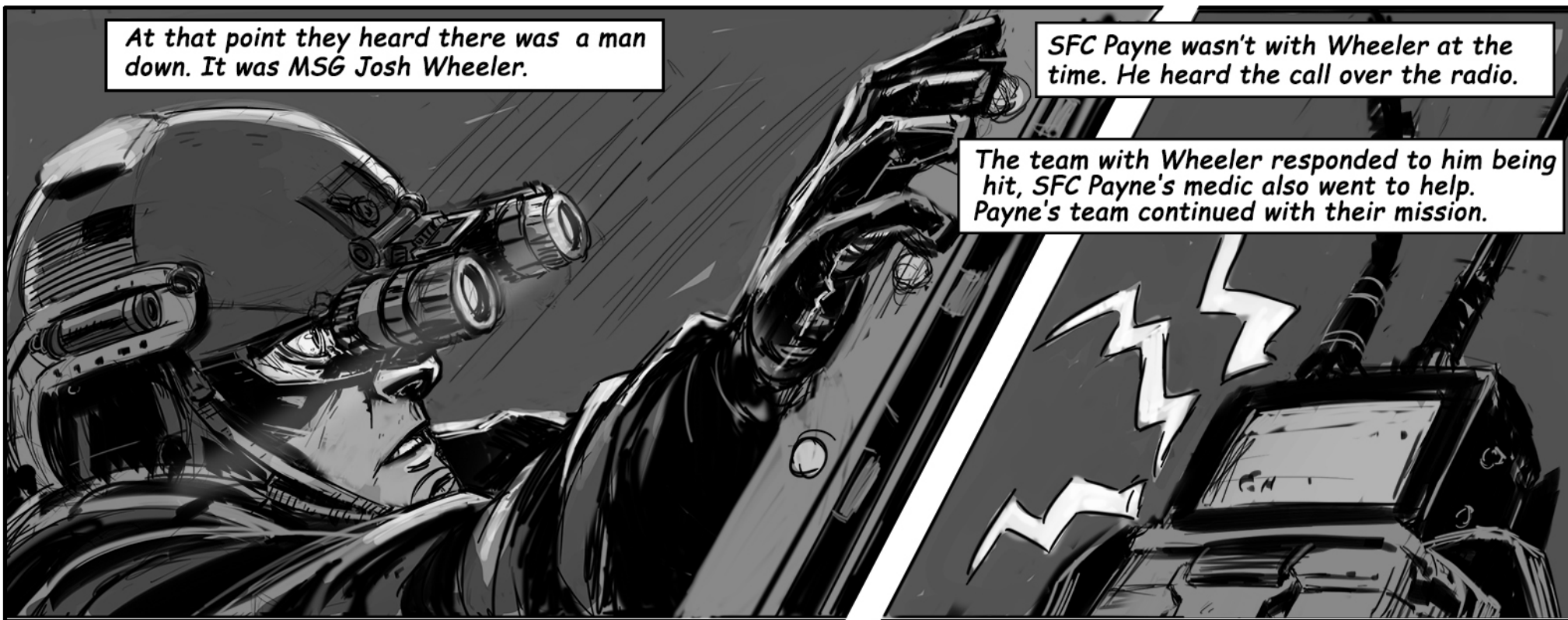
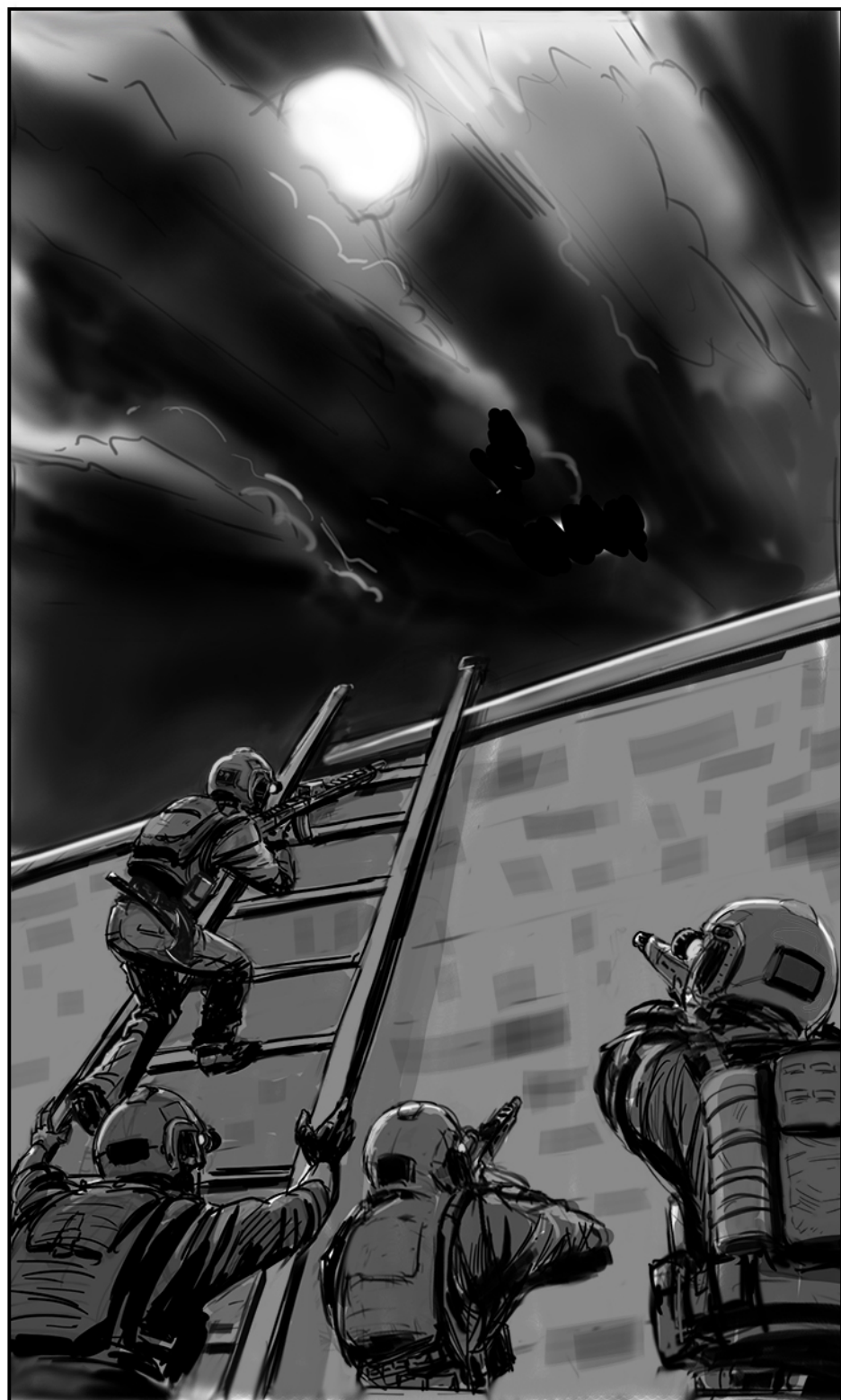


When you're able to control your fear, that's the bridge to personal courage; personal courage is contagious on the battlefield.

One of SFC Payne's teammates looked his partner in the eye and said, "Follow me..."



...and that's when they all pushed forward.



At that point they heard there was a man down. It was MSG Josh Wheeler.

SFC Payne wasn't with Wheeler at the time. He heard the call over the radio.

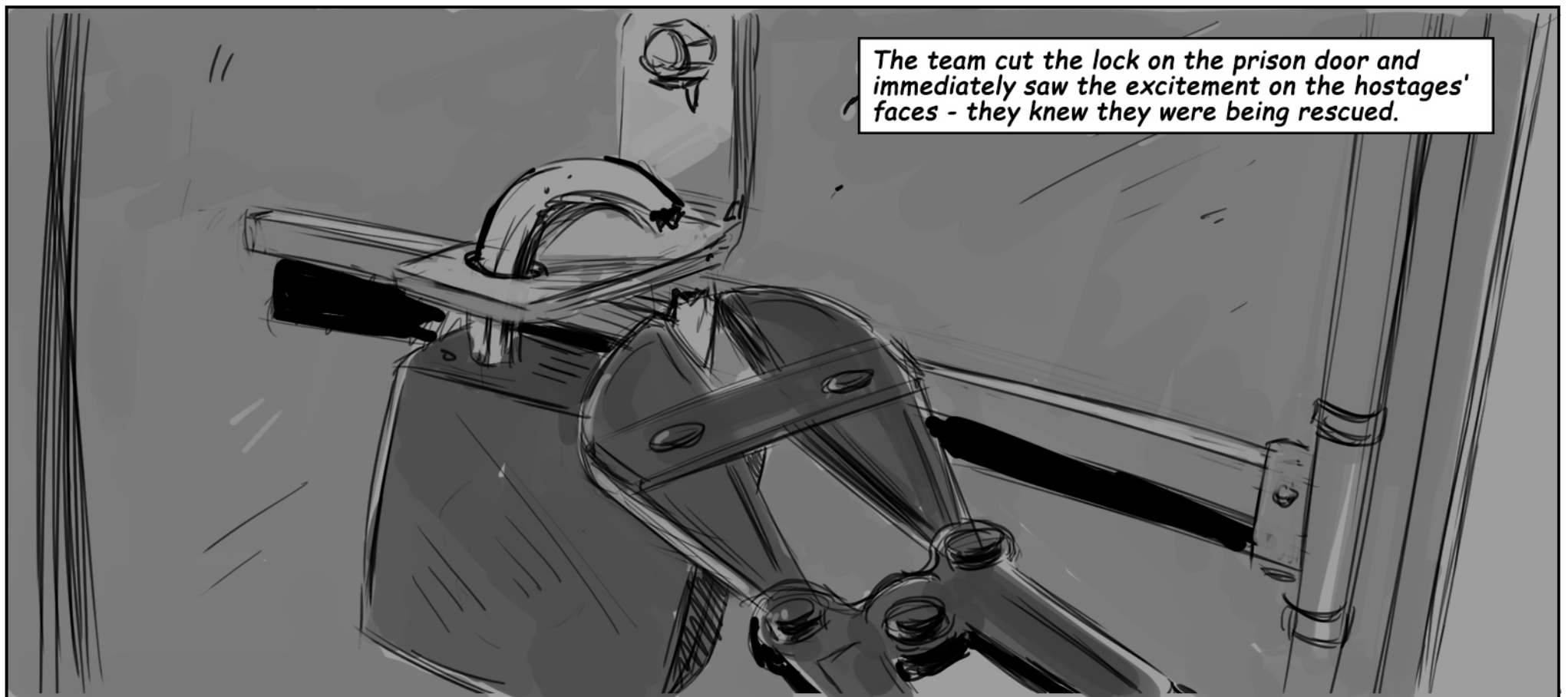
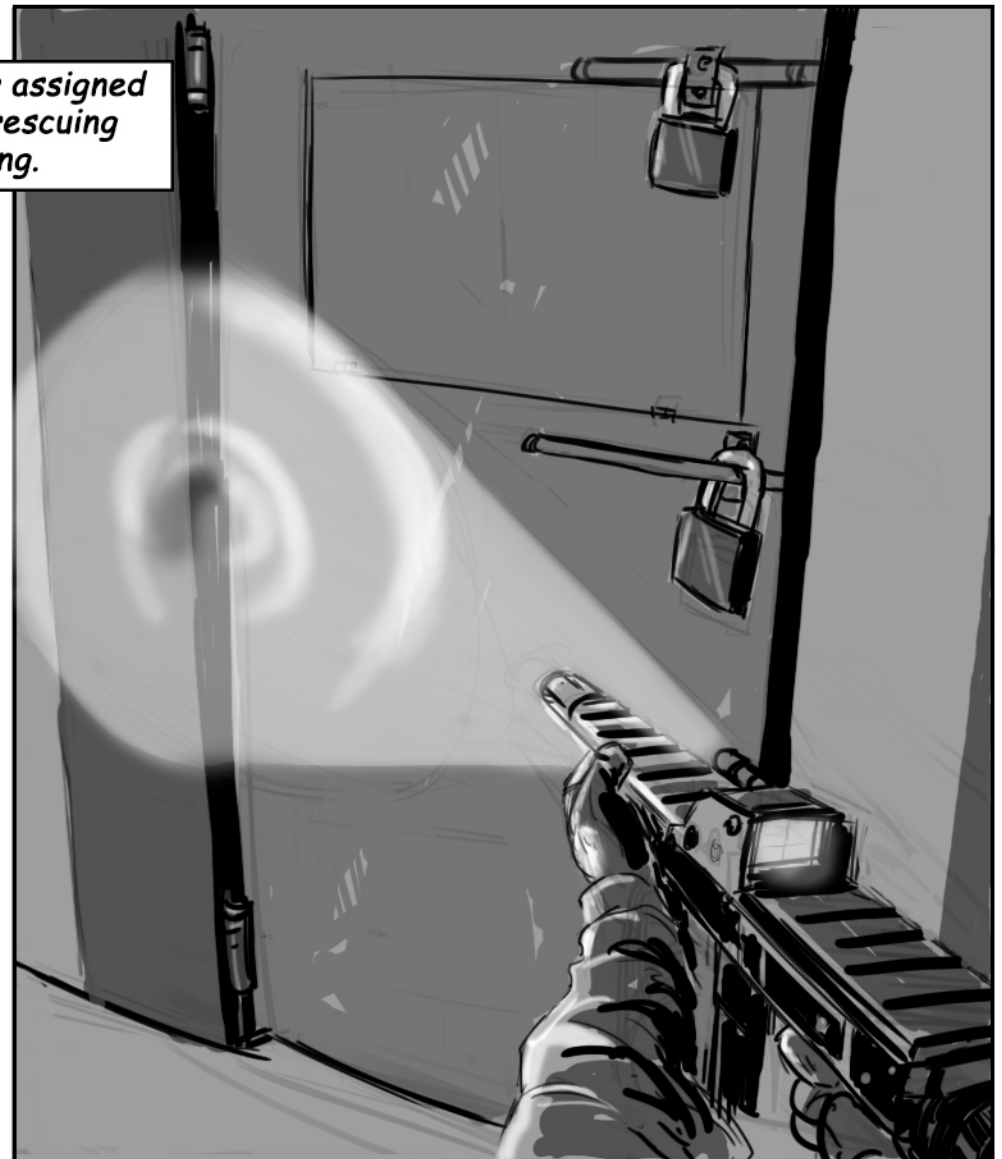
The team with Wheeler responded to him being hit, SFC Payne's medic also went to help. Payne's team continued with their mission.







SFC Payne's team cleared their assigned building with light resistance, rescuing over 30 hostages in that building.



The team cut the lock on the prison door and immediately saw the excitement on the hostages' faces - they knew they were being rescued.



SFC Payne heard a voice over the radio that said they needed help in the other building where hostages were being held.



SFC Payne knew who made the call by the sound of his voice, and Payne's team could hear a pretty intense firefight happening over there. It was about 30 yards away.

LET'S GO!

LET'S GET IN THE FIGHT!

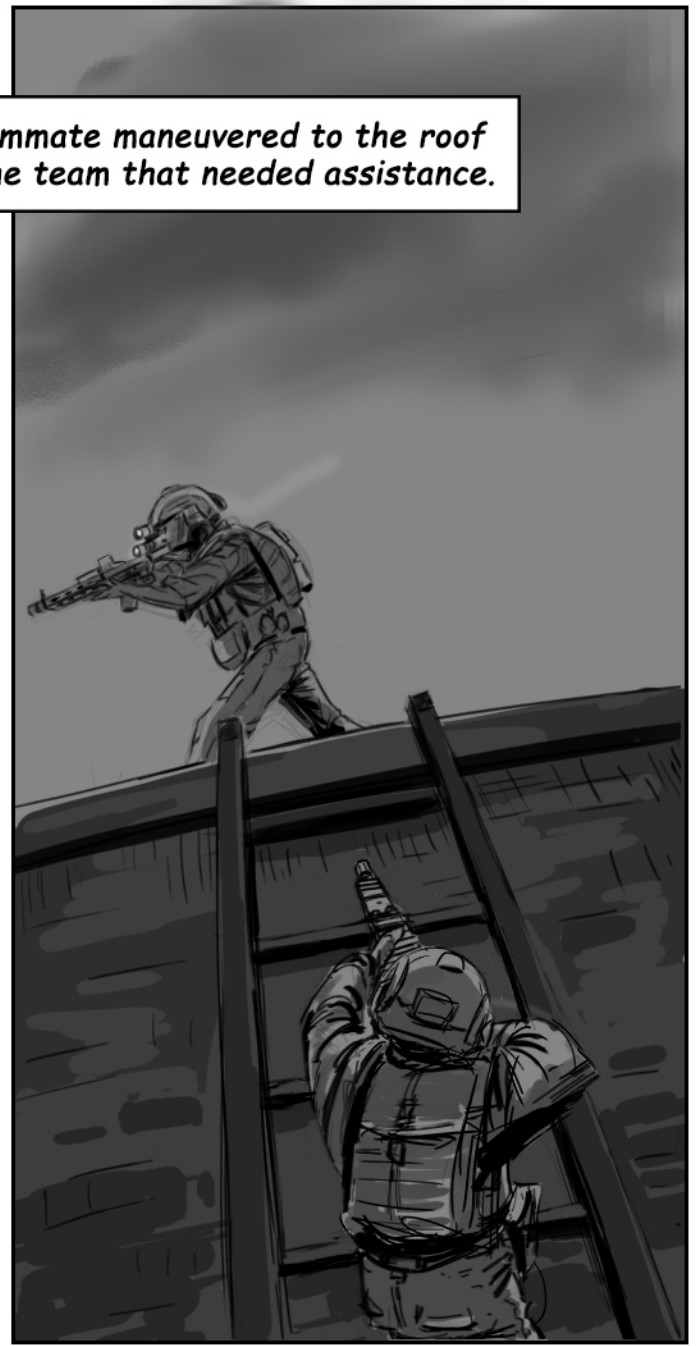


As soon as they got the call, SFC Payne told his teammate, "Let's get in the fight."





At that point SFC Payne and his teammate maneuvered to the roof of the building and linked up with the team that needed assistance.



All this time, SFC Payne's team was being actively engaged by enemy combatants from the west, and ISIS fighters were also right below them.





The building was on fire. SFC Payne's team employed grenades on the enemy combatants from the roof.



After employing the grenades, SFC Payne's team heard and felt additional explosions below them as the ISIS fighters yelled, "Allahu Akbar," and started detonating their suicide vests.



At that point, SFC Payne's team realized they weren't going to be able to access the building through the roof, so they maneuvered downstairs to look for other opportunities to enter the building.

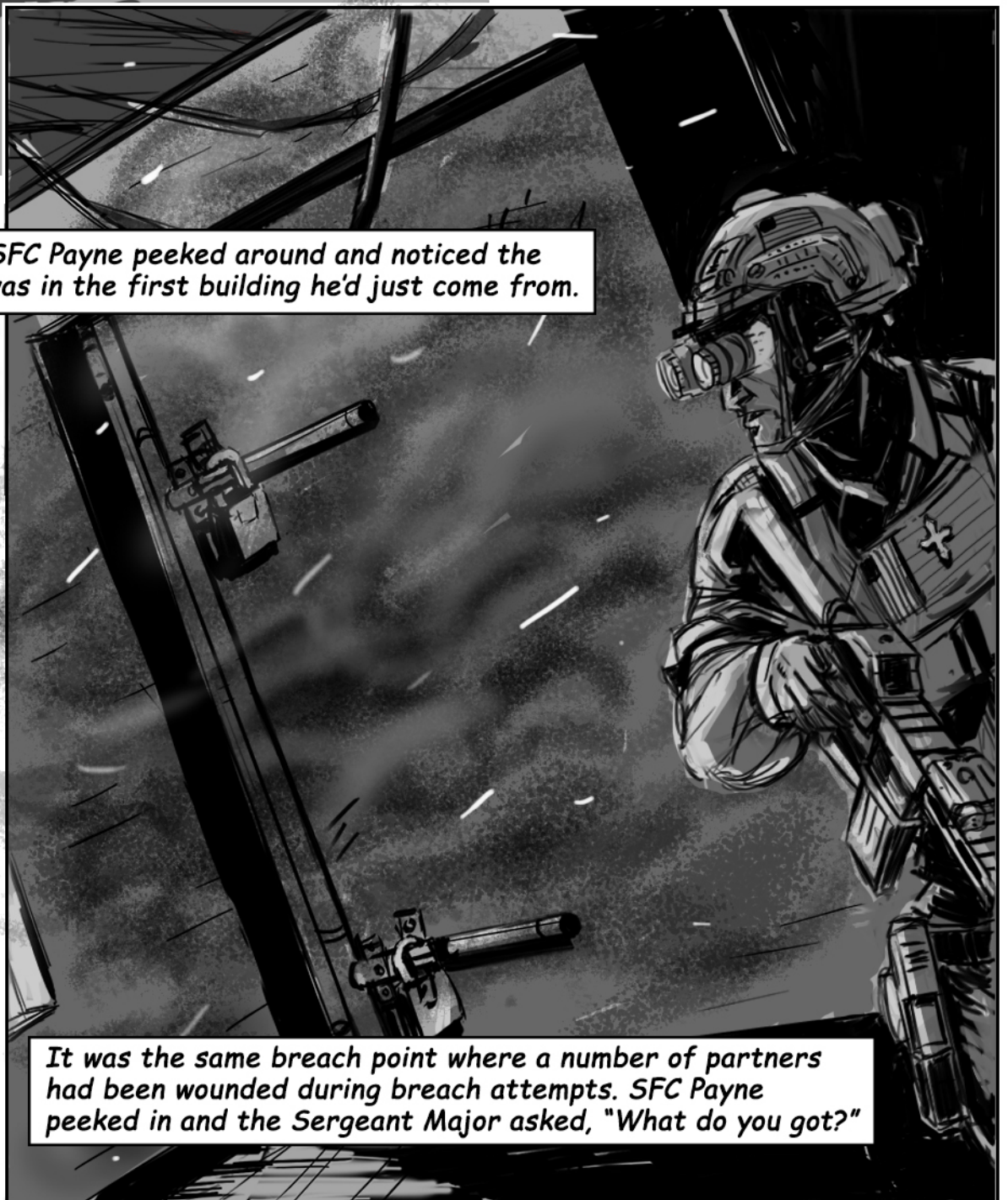




From the ground, the rescue force breached walls and attempted to breach windows.



When that didn't work SFC Payne peeked around and noticed the same prison door that was in the first building he'd just come from.



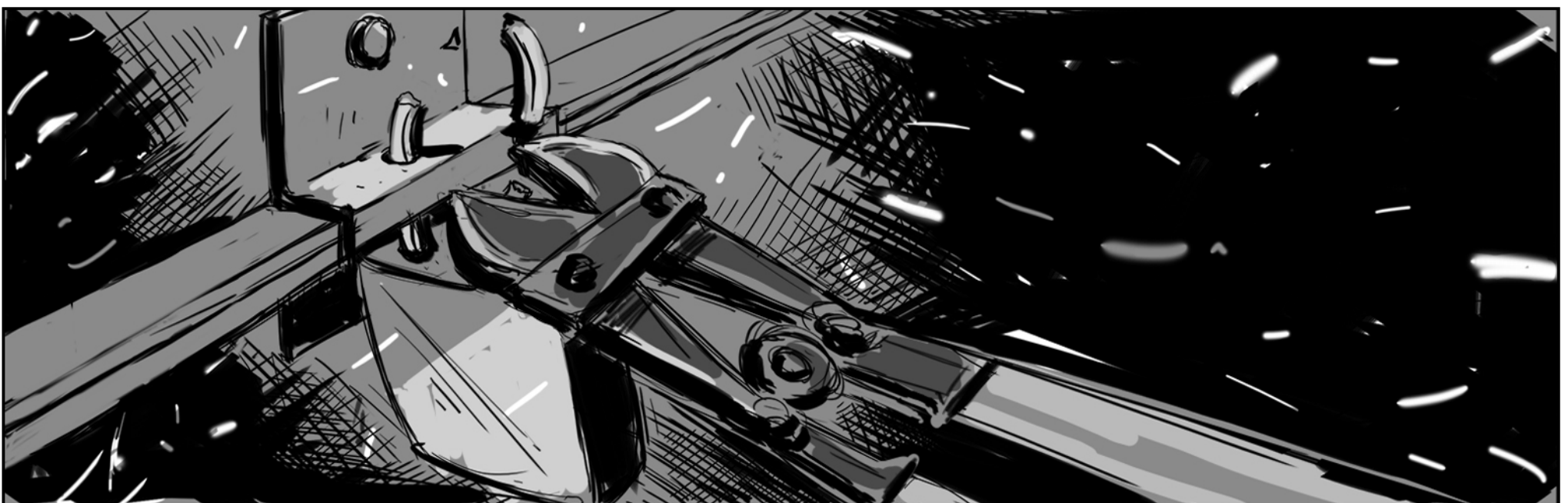
It was the same breach point where a number of partners had been wounded during breach attempts. SFC Payne peeked in and the Sergeant Major asked, "What do you got?"



The partner force needed some strong leadership and inspiration, so SFC Payne grabbed the bolt cutters.



Sergeant Major said, "I've got you," and started engaging enemy forces at the back of the building.



SFC Payne was able to cut one of the locks on the prison door and had to go out for fresh air.

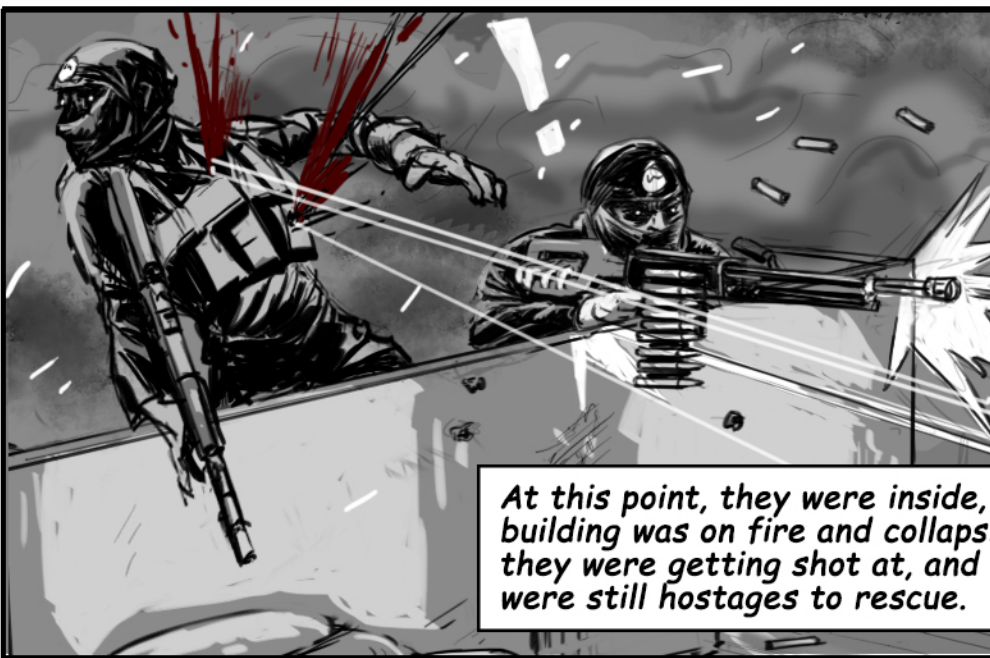


The partner force tried to cut the remaining lock, but they were unable.



SFC Payne then went back in and cut the remaining lock.



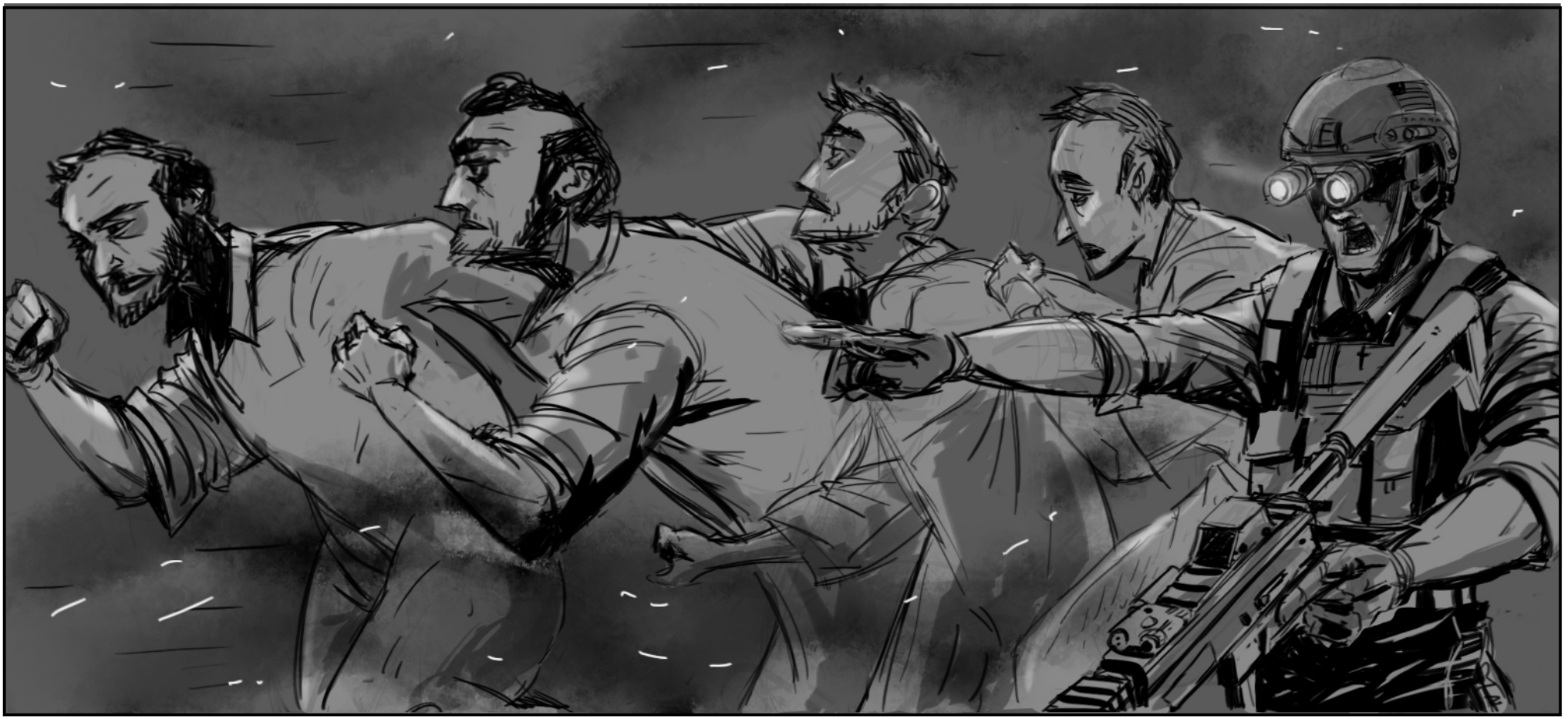


At this point, they were inside, the building was on fire and collapsing, they were getting shot at, and there were still hostages to rescue.

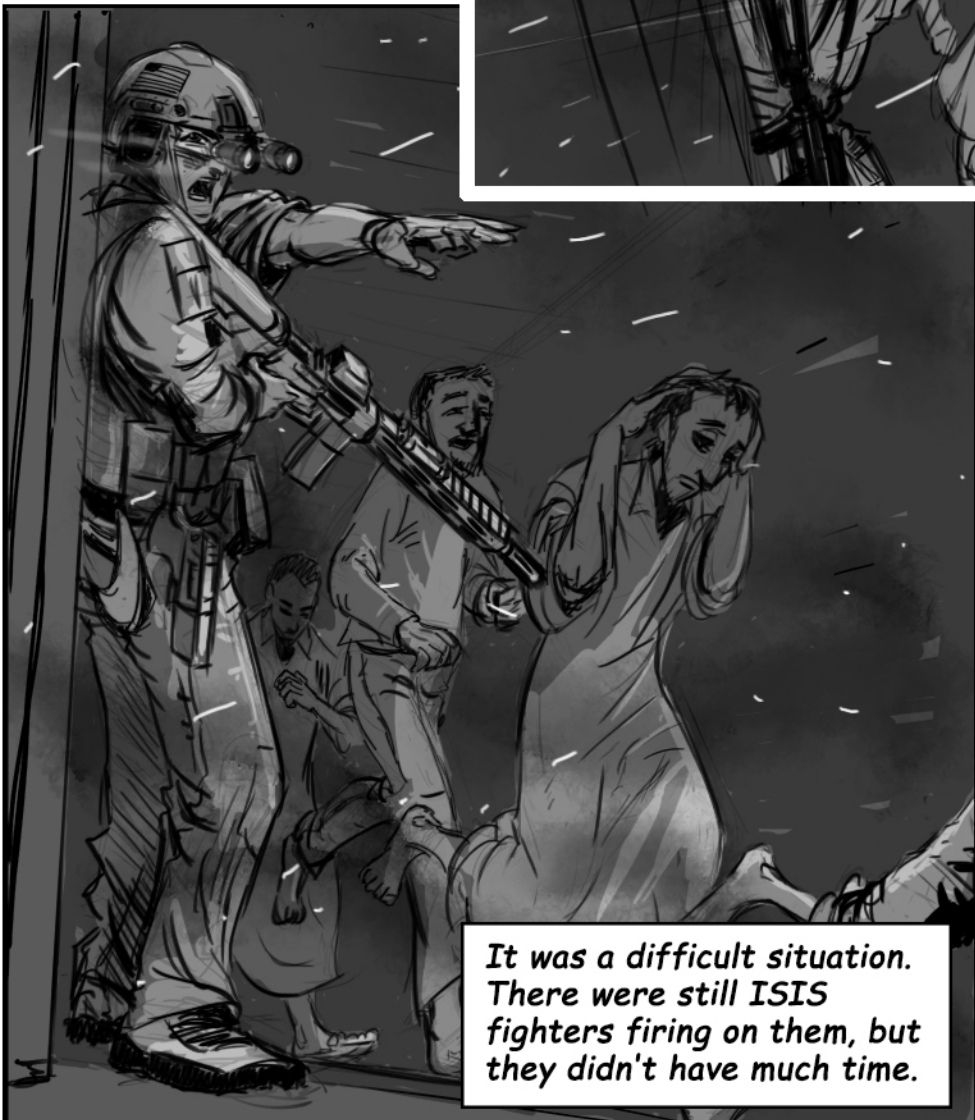


As soon as they entered, they got the call on the radio that the building was starting to collapse.

That's when the mandatory emergency evacuation call was given on the radio.



One of the hostages stopped in the breezeway, so SFC Payne grabbed him and pulled him through to get the hostages moving again.



It was a difficult situation. There were still ISIS fighters firing on them, but they didn't have much time.

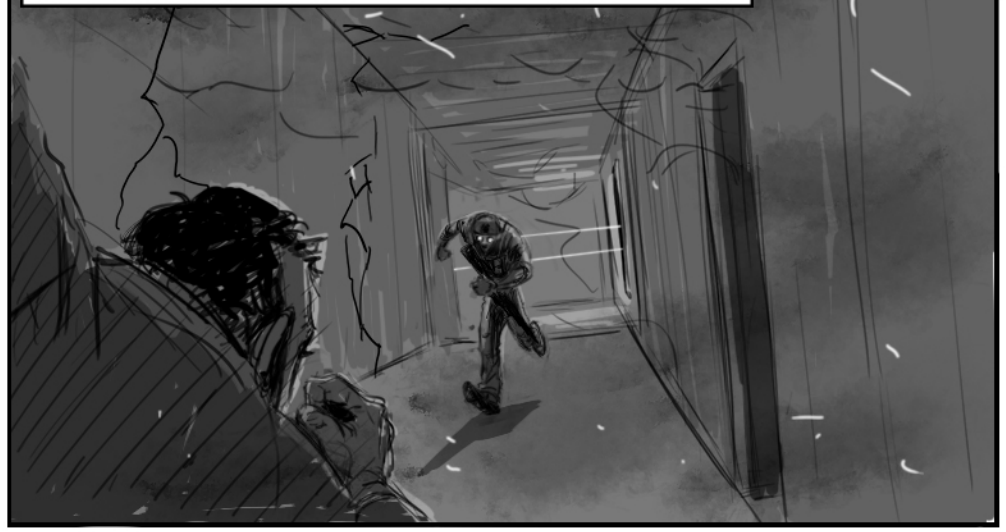


The rescue force continued engaging enemy combatants while ushering the hostages to safety.

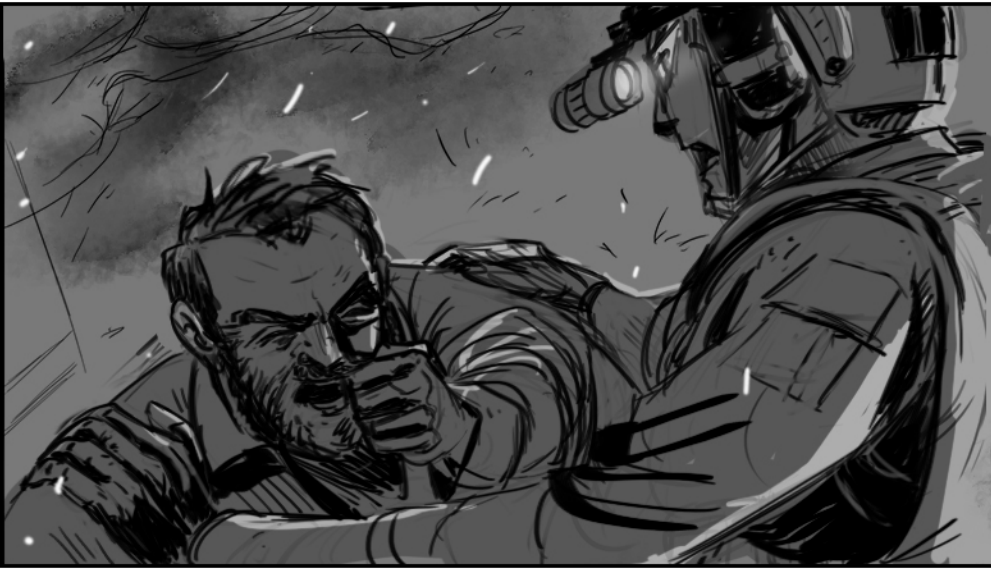
Sergeant Major said to get the hostages out of there. The rescue force made a human wall so the hostages could run safely behind them. Any time the rescue force engaged enemy combatants, the hostages would stop running, presumably out of fear, so they had to stop shooting for the hostages to continue running.



SFC Payne ran back in the building and noticed a large man who had basically given up on life and was laying on the ground.



SFC Payne grabbed the man and pulled him safely out of the building.



SFC Payne ran into the building one last time making a final visual check before being the last man out.



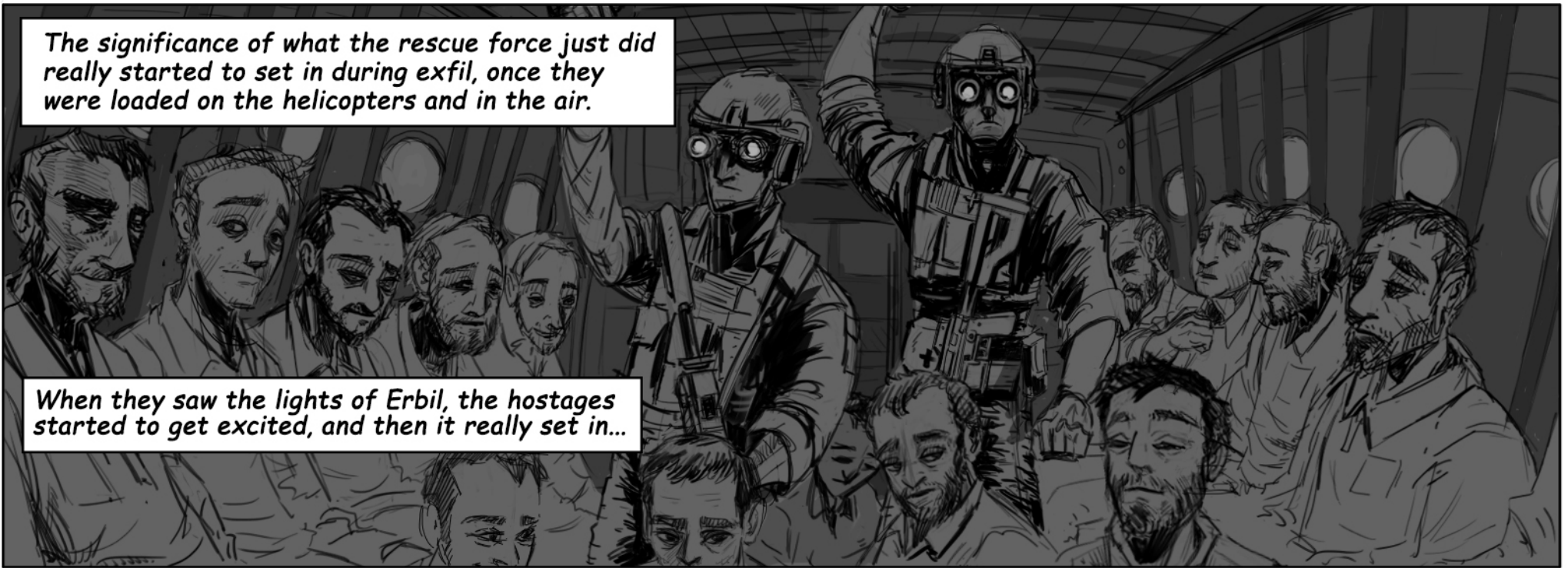
"LAST MAN"





The significance of what the rescue force just did really started to set in during exfil, once they were loaded on the helicopters and in the air.

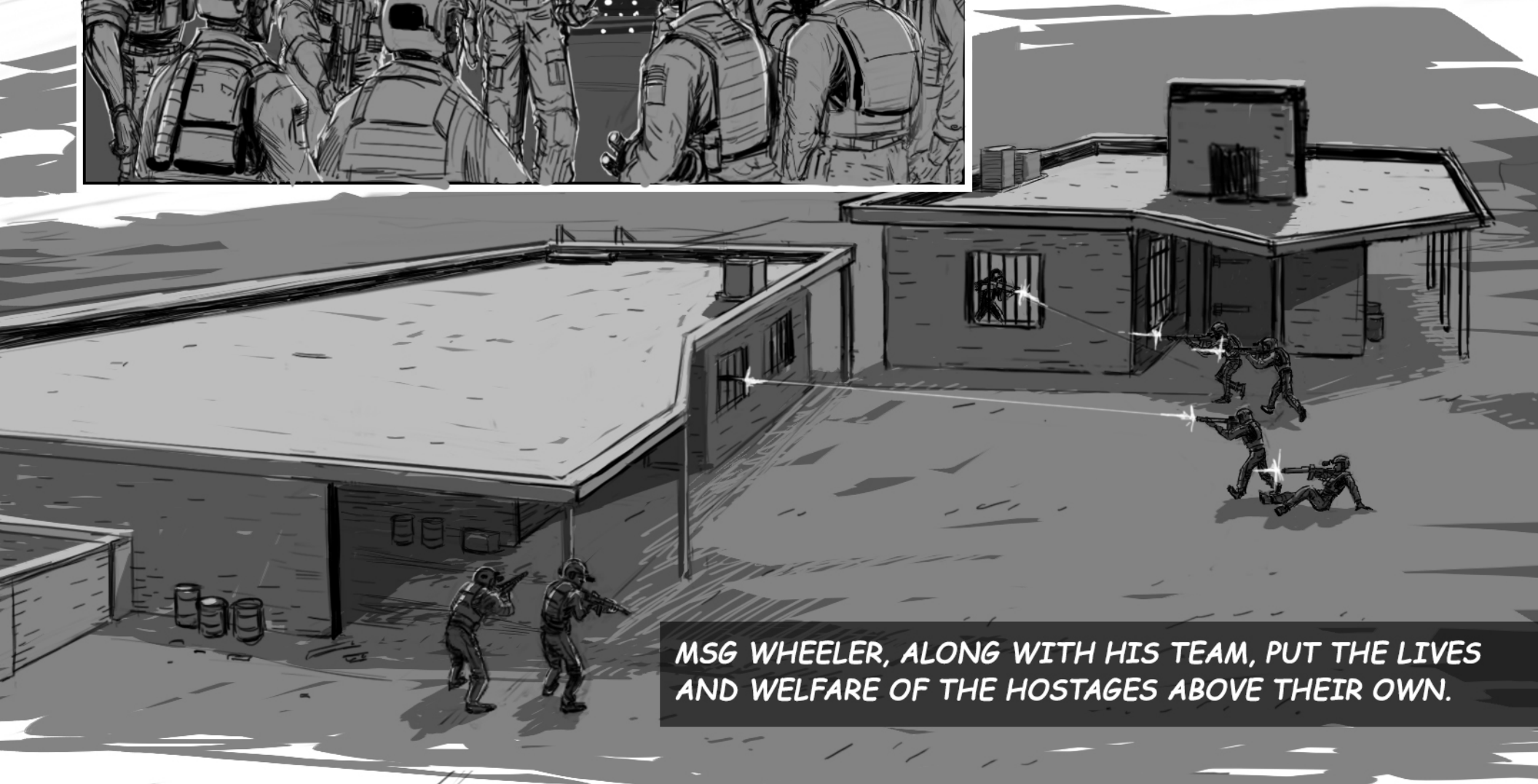
When they saw the lights of Erbil, the hostages started to get excited, and then it really set in...



- "what did we just do?"



WHEN THE MISSION WAS COMPLETE, PAYNE'S TEAM LEARNED WHAT MSG JOSH WHEELER DID THAT NIGHT.



MSG WHEELER, ALONG WITH HIS TEAM, PUT THE LIVES AND WELFARE OF THE HOSTAGES ABOVE THEIR OWN.



AS HE LED HIS TEAM TO THE SOUND OF THE GUNS, HIS LAST WORDS WERE, "ON ME!"

— "ON ME!"