



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

**BLAZE OF GLORY: THE FIRST  
VOLUME OF THE LAWS OF MAGIC**

by Michael Pryor

**Format: Paperback**

**ISBN: 9781741662498**

**Imprint: Random House Australia**

**Released: September 2007**



Aubrey Fitzwilliam hated being dead. It made things much harder than they needed to be.

'When you're quite ready, Fitzwilliam! We haven't got all day!' bawled the pimply-faced Warrant Officer. Aubrey stood up straighter and glanced at him. The WO was Atkins, a fellow sixth-former, a newcomer to Stone-lea School. He had an Adam's apple that made him look as if he'd swallowed a melon and he was taking great pleasure in his small position of authority. 'Two laps of the Hummocks, full pack.' Atkins paused to gloat. 'Lovely weather for it, cadet, if you enjoy heatstroke.'

Aubrey said nothing. He lifted his chin, stiffened his back and stared straight ahead to study the rounded hills of the Hummocks. The pounded earth trail he had to follow wound its way up and down through the sparse growth of the training course. Heat haze made the air ripple over the farthest reaches, obscuring the fence that separated the training course from the school playing fields.

Two miles, more or less. His task was to complete the circuit twice, at the double – in early afternoon heat that had already sent the tennis players from the courts and the birds to drowsiness in the trees around the fence line.

Before his accident, Aubrey knew he would have completed the challenge without difficulty, even though, at the age of seventeen when many others were filling out and taking on their adult strength, he was still slight. He had pale skin, black hair and dark-brown – almost black – eyes, and he looked frail, a poet rather than an athlete. But he'd always managed to surprise people with his determination in running, boxing, or games. Boys much larger than him had learned that provoking skinny Aubrey to fight could be a poor idea. He could drag himself over broken glass if he set his mind to it.

But since the disastrous magical experiment, things were different. Balanced on the edge of true death as he was, physical strain – even emotional strain – could tip him over. He only kept the semblance of a normal existence by a combination of arcane spells and strength of mind. If his magic failed, it would be the end for him.

I'll just have to make sure I don't let that happen, he thought. He adjusted his shoulders.

'Step lively, now!' Atkins said. 'The clock's running! Don't keep us waiting! Remember, no magical assistance!'

Aubrey set off, grinding his teeth. Steady on, he told himself. He was probably bullied by his older brothers. And sisters.

The heavy woollen uniform itched, but Aubrey had no time to scratch under the khaki. With the weight of a full field pack on his back, it was all he could do to retain his balance as he shuffled along as fast as he could in a shambling gait that resembled a drunken sailor more than a well-trained soldier.

**Extract from BLAZE OF GLORY by Michael Pryor**

Available from all good bookshops

ISBN: 9781741662498 | Imprint: Random House Australia | Publisher: Random House Australia



## RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

Heat hammered down from the cloudless sky and radiated from the hard dirt path. Aubrey staggered up the first hill that gave the course its name. His breath rasped in a throat that felt as if it was made of sandpaper.

Dimly, he could see Atkins and his cronies standing in the shade of a row of elm trees. They were sniggering and pointing, but Aubrey was pleased to see that they became more circumspect when George Doyle sauntered over. With his massive shoulders and height, George looked more like a wrestler than a student. For years, Aubrey had seen George stop arguments and make fists drop simply by appearing on the scene. It was an ability that Aubrey had used, on occasion, to his own benefit. After all, what were best friends for?

Aubrey's forearms ached as he held the heavy Symons rifle in front of him. The wretched thing was thirty years old, if it was a day, but – thanks to Aubrey's meticulous maintenance – was in perfect working order, even if it hadn't seen live ammunition in decades. Aubrey had even replaced the bolt action, using a spare part he'd found in one of the outbuildings at Maidstone.

Whatever gets me there, Aubrey thought and he gritted his teeth again.

He felt the webbing straps of his pack cutting into his shoulders and decided, not for the first time, that his desire for promotion to Warrant Officer was one of his more stupid ambitions. He'd sailed through the written examination and the interview from two army majors was straightforward. All that remained was the physical test.

Aubrey reached the next hill and stumbled. He heard laughter. 'Come on, Fitzwilliam! You want to fail, like your old man?'

Uneasy laughter greeted this jibe. Aubrey tightened his grip on the rifle and slogged up the slope, cursing the varying height of the hummocks that made it hard to maintain a rhythm. His pack threatened to topple him backwards, but he was prepared. He leaned forward, bent at the knees, and forged up the hill.

When he reached the summit, Aubrey tried to shake sweat from his brow, but just managed to make his helmet slip. It hung there askew, and he tried to nudge it back with his shoulder.

For a perilous moment, he was on the brink of going headfirst down the slope. He caught himself and fought momentum as he descended. His boots threatened to skid out from under him and every step jarred his teeth, but he made it to the bottom.

The next hummock was a short trot away.

Through a combination of doggedness and good decision-making, Aubrey endured for nearly half an hour, but by then he felt as if he was wandering in the bowels of a furnace.

His rifle was a mass of hot iron and wood. He could feel blisters sprouting every time he moved his grip. His helmet seemed to think it was an oven and his head was the Sunday roast. He could feel the sunlight on his back as an actual weight, as if it were heavy rain. His breath was ragged, each sip of the hot air searing his throat.

His head sagged. His gaze was on the yard or so of the path directly in front of him. If I can manage this step, he thought, and the one after that. Then the next . . .

That was all he had time to contemplate. The ground suddenly fell away from underneath him and he realised, a little too late, that he'd reached the top of another hummock and he should have been easing down the other side.

**Extract from BLAZE OF GLORY by Michael Pryor**

Available from all good bookshops

ISBN: 9781741662498 | Imprint: Random House Australia | Publisher: Random House Australia



## RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

By then, his balance was completely upset. His right foot insisted it was still climbing, while his left knew perfectly well that it was time to start heading downwards. The weight of the pack, however, had no time for Aubrey's feet to sort out their dispute, so it took over.

Aubrey had time for a startled yelp, then he pitched forward.

There was a fraction of an instant, a moment where all the forces conspiring against him were in balance and he knew that if he could angle his hip left, and flex his right knee while striking the ground just so with his heel, he could catch himself and all would be well.

Then his helmet slipped over his eyes and gravity was in charge.

Aubrey flew forwards, somersaulted once, then landed on his chest. He slid the rest of the way down the slope on his chin, his arms stretched out in front of him, still holding his rifle with both hands, according to regulation.

Atkins and his cronies were helpless with laughter. 'Oh, lovely style, Fitzwilliam! Lovely! Do it again!'

Despite the heat, a shiver ran through Aubrey. The perspiration drenching his body turned chill and he closed his eyes. The blackness behind his eyelids rippled and he knew that he was in trouble.

His control was wavering. The heat, the exhaustion, the physical strain had taken their toll. He was on the verge of losing his grip.

Hold on, he thought and he looked within himself for strength.

A voice nearby came to him. 'Aubrey.'

'George,' he said without opening his eyes. 'Wait. I must concentrate.'

'Your shadow,' George said. 'It's fading.'

It's worse than I thought, Aubrey decided. He breathed deeply, carefully, looking to stabilise his condition. He muttered one of the web of spells that was keeping him from the true death. He strove to pronounce each element as crisply as possible, particularly those dealing with duration, trying to re-establish their power. The strain of preventing himself from dying was a constant pressure, and he was still searching for the best combination of spells to counteract the implacable tugging on his soul. If the spells collapsed, his soul would pass through the final portal into the great unknown. Not for the first time, he cursed his own foolishness for putting himself in this perilous position.

Heavy footsteps made him open his eyes.

George was squatting next to him, shading him from the sun. Next to George, Atkins stood, hands on hips, a silhouette against the blue sky. His cronies stood around him, a straggly group of supporters. 'On your feet, Fitzwilliam,' the WO growled. He nudged Aubrey in the side with his boot. 'Your old man isn't here to help you now.'

Aubrey didn't move. A minute, Aubrey thought. That's all I need. Then I'll stand, brush myself off, salute, apologise for my poor form . . .

**Extract from BLAZE OF GLORY by Michael Pryor**

Available from all good bookshops

ISBN: 9781741662498 | Imprint: Random House Australia | Publisher: Random House Australia



## RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

George straightened and dusted his hands. 'I don't think you should say things like that,' he said to Atkins, his voice low, his face mild. 'It gets him angry.'

'Hah!' one of Atkins' cronies said. 'So?'

'You should be afraid of getting him angry,' George said. 'I get afraid when he's angry.'

The guffaws died down as they waded through what George had just suggested. Aubrey could see their laboured brain processes as they squinted and took in George's size, and wondered what on earth could make him afraid . . .

Atkins cleared his throat. His slender grasp of military authority and decision-making was apparent on his face. He was groping for the best course of action that would allow him to keep his dignity, while maintaining that Aubrey was a worthless piece of cadet trash unsuited for officer training.

'I think I should get him to the infirmary,' George suggested.

Atkins nodded. Slowly at first, then more vigorously as the idea took hold. 'Yes. Quite right. See to it.'

He tried to gather his cronies with a glance. They stared at him, then he pushed the nearest in the direction of the gate. He strode off; they trotted in his wake.

Aubrey lifted his head and tried to prop himself on an elbow. After three attempts, he was successful. 'George, can you get this bloody pack off first? Might make things a little easier.' George slung the pack over one shoulder. Balancing the load, he reached down and helped Aubrey to his feet. For a moment, Aubrey's head swam and his knees threatened to buckle. George slipped an arm under his. 'Ready?'

'Of course. I should be, after that nice lie down.'

Blood dripped from Aubrey's chin and onto his uniform. He took a half-hearted swipe. It smeared.

They limped to the gate, past the glowering Atkins, past the snickering cronies.

'He's failed, you know that!' Atkins called. 'All his father's influence can't change that!'

Aubrey let out a bitter snort of laughter. 'That's the last thing in the world I want, favours from my father.'

George sighed. 'I know, Aubrey. I know.'

Copyright © Michael Pryor 2006

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

**Extract from BLAZE OF GLORY by Michael Pryor**

Available from all good bookshops

ISBN: 9781741662498 | Imprint: Random House Australia | Publisher: Random House Australia