“It’s so nice to be back in Benghazi,” Christopher Stevens, US ambassador to Libya, wrote in his diary on the night of Sept. 11, 2012. Stevens felt a “much stronger emotional connection” to Benghazi — with its smaller-town feel, “moist air & green & spacious compound” — than he had for Tripoli. That said, he concluded his entry by noting the “[n]ever ending security threats,” with an ellipsis tailing off toward the end of the page.

Within hours, the compound would be overrun, and Stevens, along with Sean Smith, a State Department communications officer, would be dead in an episode that remains enveloped in controversy. In “13 Hours: The Inside Account of What Really Happened in Benghazi,” Mitchell Zuckoff, a journalism professor at Boston University, draws on interviews with five surviving contract security operators who defended the State Department Special Mission Compound and a CIA station called the Annex, to tell the story, almost minute-by-minute, of the desperate attempt to protect Americans and repel the attackers.
Zuckoff endorses the claims of the Senate Intelligence Committee that the State Department could have prevented the attack by responding to intelligence reports indicating the need for enhanced security. In contrast to that report, however, he suggests that there was a “stand down” order delivered by a senior CIA officer, referred to by the pseudonym Bob, which delayed the security team from heading immediately for the Compound.

That said, “13 Hours” does not address the larger issues posed by Benghazi, including what Obama officials knew and when they knew it; whether the attack was, as the administration had theorized, a spontaneous protest over “Innocence of Muslims,” an anti-Mohammed video posted on YouTube, or a well-planned act of terrorism; and whether White House talking points were designed to mislead the American people about a possible role played by Al Qaeda. Nor does Zuckoff discuss the now routine employment of private contractors instead of military personnel by the federal government to provide security for Americans stationed around the world.

Instead, Zuckoff focuses on the Benghazi security men — Mark “Oz” Geist, Kris “Tanto” Paronto, John “Tig” Tiegen, Tyrone “Rone” Woods, Jack Silva, and Dave “D.B.” Benton (Benton and Silva are pseudonyms, used to protect the privacy of their families). “13 Hours” is a suspenseful (and often violent) account of their competence and courage, written with the hope that their actions will be “understood on their own terms, outside of partisan or political interests.”

13 HOURS: The Inside Account of What Really Happened in Benghazi

Author: Mitchell Zuckoff with the Annex Security Team

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Zuckoff is especially effective in evoking 21st century Benghazi, where it is virtually
impossible for an American official to distinguish friend from foe. When Tig first entered the Compound, for example, he saw a Libyan man in camouflage pants walking away from the burning barracks. Because the man was unarmed, and “seemed to belong there,” Tig did not shoot him. When he approached the front of the villa, Tig heard someone kick in a door. As he waited for security agents or terrorists to emerge, Tig saw a Land Cruiser speeding by and raised his machine gun. A split second before he fired, he recognized the face of a colleague through the windshield, took his finger off the trigger, and “exhaled.”

The Benghazi survivors have given closed-door testimony to Congress. They still keep in touch with one another. Each wears a black aluminum bracelet etched with the names of their fallen comrades, along with the date and location of their deaths. Although “13 Hours” provides little guidance about the foreign policies that will best serve American interests, or about how to secure our embassies, it does provide a moving reminder of the sacrifice made by these men who had voluntarily put themselves in harm’s way, and who “believed in their work and their country.”

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