

THE FINAL VERDICT

Written by Eric Halstead | Adapted from The Final Verdict: A Shane Alexander Novel
Military Legal Drama | Feature | 119 pages

LOGLINE: *Sentenced to 43 years for gunning down the snipers who killed his best friend in Bosnia, a young Army specialist gets one last shot at freedom when a relentless civilian lawyer uncovers the witness testimony the Army buried to make him its scapegoat.*

Fort Bragg, 1998. SPECIALIST SHANE ALEXANDER (early 20s) stands at rigid attention as a court-martial panel finds him guilty of murder, failure to obey a lawful order, and conduct discrediting the service. The sentence: forty-three years, a dishonorable discharge, and the loss of everything. At Leavenworth he becomes inmate 45287, silent and alone, reliving the same firefight every night.

Four months in, MIKE CHISHOLM, a profane, sharp-witted civilian lawyer with an ex-soldier's edge, turns up with a folder full of red flags: a conflicted jury panel, a court-appointed defense that never pushed back, and evidence that never reached the courtroom. Chisholm is convinced Shane is still protecting someone, and he won't take the case until Shane tells the story he never told at trial.

In 1997, Shane and his childhood best friend LORAN TAYLOR leave small-town Oklahoma for a "peacekeeping" tour in Bosnia. Shane is handed a machine gun he never asked for and drilled on strict Rules of Engagement: if they stop shooting, you stop shooting. On security duty at the Kiseljak market, where intel warns Serb hardliners may strike, he notices a frightened young mother with a baby, a group of Serb men who want to be seen, and figures watching from the ridgeline. He radios it in and is told not to escalate. Then the shooting starts. Loran breaks cover to pull the frozen mother and child to safety and is shot through the neck, dying in Shane's arms. Shane opens fire on the ridge and kills all five shooters, the last one as he runs uphill, still armed. The young mother crawls over and gently closes Loran's eyes.

The Army's investigation seizes on civilian claims of a "lull" before Shane's final burst. His squad leader, STAFF SERGEANT LAUGHLIN, warns him they want a fall guy, and Shane is even barred from Loran's memorial.

Chisholm keeps digging. He finds translated eyewitness statements that were "lost" before trial, Rules of Engagement that were rewritten after the firefight and then used against Shane, and a radio log proving command knew about the ridge before the first shot. Through MILO JOVANOVIĆ, a chatty former NATO translator, he tracks down EMIR BEGOVIĆ, a shepherd who watched the whole ambush from the opposite hill and says the gunfire never paused. Chisholm files the appeal.

June 1999. Shane is back at Fort Bragg for a new hearing, facing the same judge and the same prosecutor. Chisholm confronts Laughlin, who admits NATO brass leaned on him to shade his testimony and finally owns his failure to protect his soldier. Emir's testimony is ruled admissible, Milo verifies the buried statements, and the defense calls its final witness: NA'ADA HUSSEIN, the young mother from the market, who has flown in with her toddler son. Through a translator she tells the court what she saw: Shane never fired on the people, only toward the hill where the shooting came from.

The panel finds Shane not guilty on all charges, and for the first time he breaks down in his parents' arms. The Army restores his rank and opens a door to Special Forces selection. Na'ada gives him a sketch she drew of Loran. At Loran's grave in Oklahoma, Shane shows him the drawing, decides to put the uniform back on, and with a crooked grin finally concedes that Loran was right about one of his old barracks jokes.