

Chapter 1

Into the Battle

A damp, bone-chilling breeze filtered through the trees as Longinus peered warily over a large gray rock formation at the edge of the thick, dark forest. Beyond the rocks lay an open, fog-shrouded field. The first rays of dawn promised both the warmth of the sun and the heat of battle.

Although he couldn't see them yet, he and the other Roman troops knew that the barbarians were there—waiting, planning, and eager for a fight. He had yet to encounter these “savages,” as his commander called them, but he had heard others say that they were giants.

“They're fierce and fearless,” said a fellow soldier. “They're without culture, mercy, or fear—savages!”

And ... they were out there. He could hear them but couldn't see them through the swirling fog on the grassy meadow. Are they as fierce and powerful as others said? Or is fear making them seem larger than life? He would soon know.

As the rays of the rising sun melted away the fog, Longinus and the others heard the cornu (the large, round battle-signal horn) calling them to assemble. Instantly, more than six hundred Roman soldiers formed into ranks of twelve men each. At the next notes of the cornu, each group of twelve formed into the testudo (“turtle”). The formation did, indeed, look like a large, menacing turtle.

Longinus had to smile to himself at the thought. He remembered the day when he was a new recruit and a tough-as-iron instructor had said, “Today, you will learn how to form a turtle.” He'd laughed to himself then. Turtle? he'd thought. I want to fight, not lumber along like a dumb turtle! The instructor had glared at Longinus as though reading his thoughts and had growled, “Just do as I say, or you'll have welts all over your body. Now, form up three across and four deep—and do it on the double!”

After what seemed like hundreds of attempts, they did learn the testudo formation that day. The first three recruits across the front were taught to hold their shields at eye level and their swords at the right edge of each shield. When they were doing this to the satisfaction of their trainer, he had the remaining nine members of the formation put their shields over their own heads and the heads of those in front of them, forming a type of roof or protective shell over the group. The “turtle” was now complete.

They had practiced the formation over and over until their arms ached from holding the shields and swords. Their wicker practice shields and wooden swords were twice the weight of the real gear.

“It builds character and stamina,” barked the trainer whenever anyone dared to show stress from the exertion. “This is just practice,” he'd said. “Someday it will be real. Perfect it now, because when the time comes, your response will need to be automatic. You won't have time to think about it. You need to know how to do it immediately, or you'll wind up as food for the vultures.”

Now the words of that rugged trainer echoed in Longinus's head. The time had indeed arrived. This was for real. Now Longinus would prove himself. He was determined to earn the recognition and acceptance he'd

longed for all of his life, or he would literally die trying. He had no intent of becoming fodder for vultures.

The cornu sounded sharp, ear-piercing notes again, and the formation closed ranks as if they were one man. Each drew his sword in his right hand and thrust it to his right, out beyond the shield. They closed ranks tightly, until there was a solid line of bright, blood-red shields forming a sword-pierced wall of death. Those in the front of each rank wore grieves on their legs as additional protection.

The early morning sun danced from each bronze hand-protecting boss at the center of the shields and glimmered from the shields' bronze-reinforced edges. It was an awesome and fearful sight. With the polished swords thrusting out between the shields, the formation gave the appearance of an angry, metal-studded porcupine.

Each rank of twelve soldiers stood next to another and another and another. The “turtles” were ready to move, but not at a turtle’s pace. Theirs would be a rapidly moving, noisy, intimidating wall of death, pressing into the barbarian lines.

As the Roman troops awaited the next trumpet order, Longinus could taste the metallic flavor of fear in his mouth. His heart sounded like a drum beating rapidly behind the metal-banded armor covering his chest.

The enemy was just becoming visible. They, too, were in a line formation. They carried smaller shields and a wide variety of swords, spears, bows, billhooks, and clubs at the ready. No doubt about it—they weren’t going to run. They would fight.

So be it, he thought. I’m trained, equipped, and ready.

Suddenly, the barbarians began to shout, curse, and howl like animals as they rushed forward in a mad, death-defying charge. They sounded like a herd of wild horses stampeding down a gravel road.

Longinus tightened his grip on both his shield and sword. As he did, the cornu sounded for the legionnaires to charge. The wall of armored Roman soldiers moved steadily toward the barbarians, their measured steps in cadence with the sound of their swords slapping the metal edges of their shields.

As the Roman troops marched forward, the barbarians released a volley of arrows at them. The volley was split: some arrows were aimed directly at the Roman line, while hundreds of others were launched upward in high arcs intended to rain down death from above upon the Romans.

Longinus instinctively hunkered down, pulling his chin low, his shoulders up, and his shield a bit higher. Now, only a three-inch window remained between the top of his shield and the forehead-guard on his helmet. The red-and-yellow painted shield covered everything from his eyes to just below his knees. Since he was in the first rank, his legs were protected by grieves. He hated them. They were extra weight, and unless they were adjusted correctly, the bulky things dug into his feet.

The barbarian arrows thumped against his shield. Their iron points stuck in the multi-layered wooden shield, but didn’t penetrate far enough to do any damage. The shield worked! Longinus was glad for that. He felt an arrow glance off his right grieve. As it bounced harmlessly away, he instantly reevaluated the value of his grieves. OK, he thought. I guess they’re a good idea after all!

The two lines of warriors crashed into each other with ear-splitting violence. The Romans held their line, pushing with their shields and jabbing with their swords. And now, Roman arrows rained down on the barbarians, who were caught off guard because they were trying to defend themselves from the sword thrusts of the front line of Roman soldiers. The flashing Roman arrows brought many of them down immediately.

The cornu sounded another order, and the soldiers in the turtle formation brought their shields down to eye level and formed several layers of “front lines.” As one group of Romans threw their spears, they took a step to the side and backward, and the next line of Roman soldiers then stepped forward to throw their spears. The overlapping and rotating lines allowed the Romans to advance, defend, and throw hundreds of lead-weighted, needle-sharp spears at the barbarians—and more of them fell. The legion had its losses too. Longinus saw a soldier to his left cut down with a spear to his throat. Keep your shield up! his inner voice screamed.

Above the din and confusion of the battle, Longinus heard the unmistakable, gravel-coarse voice of his centurion, barking commands just to the left of where Longinus stood. At the sound of that voice, he instinctively shifted his eyes toward his commander. What he saw in that rapid glance made his blood run cold.

The commander had turned around to gesture to the legionnaires positioned near a large stand of trees. Out of the sight of the distracted Roman commander and that of the soldiers he was addressing, two barbarians slunk from behind some large rocks and dashed directly at him. They were about to cut down the unsuspecting Roman commander.

Longinus shouted, “Julius! Left! Now!”

His long-time best friend and fellow soldier saw immediately what was about to happen. Both Julius and Longinus sprinted toward their centurion and the rapidly approaching barbarians. One of the barbarians saw them coming and took a defensive stand meant to delay them, while the other barbarian continued to close the distance between himself and the unsuspecting centurion.

The shouts and the sound of running caused the commander to wheel around just as the barbarian hurled his spear. The fortunately timed turn caused the spear to miss the Roman leader’s body by inches. It did, however, nick his arm.

Longinus and Julius struggled to bring down the barbarian who was blocking their access to the commander. Julius finally subdued him as Longinus sprinted to the aid of his centurion, who was now in a hand-to-hand struggle with a barbarian who outweighed him by eighty pounds.

With a swing of his tree-trunk-sized arm, the barbarian knocked the centurion to the ground and thrust a second spear at him. The centurion rolled desperately away, and the weapon pinned his tunic to the dirt. The barbarian unleashed a savage kick that made the centurion double up in pain, gasping for what he thought might be his last breath. The barbarian smirked as he raised the spear for the final thrust.

At that instant, Longinus threw his spear and caught the barbarian in the ribs. With a shrill shriek, the barbarian clutched at his side and dropped his own weapon. Longinus was on him instantly, with Julius right behind. The wounded barbarian struggled, but he was no match for two strapping Roman soldiers. They used

their swords to end the wild, thrashing struggle.

Then Longinus and Julius turned their attention to their commander, who had managed to get up onto one knee and was gasping for breath.

“Sir! Are you all right?” queried Longinus, as he reached out to steady the shaken man.

“Yes, I think so. Good work, soldiers,” he gasped as he struggled to his feet. “Good work, indeed. I never saw them coming. It was a well-set trap, and I almost wound up being the mouse,” he said with a bit of a smile.

“Longinus and Julius, right?” asked the centurion, nodding his head toward them.

“Yes, sir,” replied the two soldiers in unison.

“You saved my life today. I won’t forget that. You will be amply rewarded,” the centurion said as he examined the wound on his arm. “I’m in your debt, and I thank you for doing your job well. Now, back to your positions. We have a battle to win.” With that, he turned and began to direct the rest of the troops.

Longinus and Julius grinned at each other like a couple of schoolboys who had just won a prize. They had saved their commander’s life, and he’d said he would reward them. What’s more, the commander actually knew their names. They mattered.

That’s why Longinus was here. He had wanted—and won—the recognition of his commander. For an instant, that recognition nearly erased his fear.

Then, suddenly, out of nowhere, a huge, ragged, wild-eyed enemy lurched directly toward him. The man wore no armor and carried only a small round shield and a huge wooden club with iron studs protruding from it. His shock of unruly auburn hair made him look like a moving torch. The snarl on his face made clear that he was inflamed with hatred and rage and intended to offer Longinus to the vultures. His eyes locked on to Longinus’ eyes. At that instant, everything seemed to both speed up and slow down. Time slipped into a new dimension.

As the barbarian crashed into Longinus’s shield, Longinus swiftly shoved the shield out and up. The shield caught the man just under the chin, ripping a ragged red gash in his neck. His eyes widened with pain and surprise. Longinus made a quick thrust with his sword that dug deep into his opponent’s side. The man roared with anger and pain and began to fall. As he fell, he grabbed Longinus’s shield and kicked his legs out from under Longinus, putting him on his hands and knees. Then the huge barbarian swung his massive foot up, catching Longinus full in the face. The blow sent Longinus sprawling onto his back while the barbarian sprang to his feet.

Longinus’s shield was gone, and—the wind knocked out of him—he couldn’t lift his sword. He rolled over and tried to get up, but the huge foot of the barbarian thumped down on his armor, pinning him to the ground. If he had not been wearing the new, banded armor, the barbarian would have crushed his chest like a man stepping on a beetle.

Then, Longinus saw, as if in slow motion, the barbarian bringing down his huge war club. The blow was intended to crush Longinus’s skull. Instinctively, Longinus raised both hands to ward off the impending impact.

As he did, he jerked his head to the side, attempting to avoid the worst of the blow.

When the club hit, Longinus could both feel and hear the bones in his left arm break. Then the club slammed into his helmet with a resounding crash. Immediately, Longinus's vision was filled with spinning, cloudy darkness that was spangled and split with flashes of brilliant light and a swirling, red mist. The sound of voices of men in combat all around him changed to a roar like that of a waterfall plunging over a rock face. He thought, So this is what it feels like to die!

Then everything went black and silent.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Who or what are your “savages” or threats? What are your current fears? What are your emotional or spiritual battles? How do you fight those personal threats? How can you know their true strength?
2. The testudo formation gave maximum protection for all members. What group could help sustain and protect you? How do they do that? What do you contribute to the group? Who needs your protection?
3. Roman soldiers listened to the battle trumpet, the cornu, for directives. How do you “hear” God’s marching orders for your spiritual battles?
4. When have you had your spiritual or emotional shield pulled down? What was it like to be vulnerable, and how did you handle it?
5. Have you faced the reality of your own death? What effect did it have on you to face your own mortality?
6. How and from whom do you seek approval?