

# TALES FROM THE TRENCHES

A PMTales Survival Guide to  
Impossible Projects and Last-Minute Miracles

D. B. TRENCH

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Minute Miracles*

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PMTALES

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This book is a work of satire and professional commentary. Names, characters, organizations, incidents, dialogue, and situations are fictionalized, generalized, or composite in nature. Any resemblance to actual persons, organizations, or events is coincidental or structural.

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*For the ones who kept the thing moving while everyone else  
called it “on track.”*

They said it was manageable.

It was not.

We proceeded.

## BEFORE THE FIRST TALE

Get the free Trench Field Notes Kit.

The stories in this book follow a pattern: the official version of events, what was actually happening, and what to do about it.

The Trench Field Notes Kit is the practical version of that same pattern. Five field notes and a one-page log for capturing what the room is not saying — before the official story becomes the only one.

[PMTales.com/free-resources](http://PMTales.com/free-resources).

Enter your email and receive the kit immediately.

You will also receive The Dispatch — weekly field notes from inside the same machinery these stories are about.

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## Introduction

Welcome to the Battlefield

Project management is one of the few professions where a room can describe something plainly impossible, look directly at you, and still end the conversation with, “So I think we’re in good shape.”

I have watched this happen under fluorescent lights, in polished boardrooms, on rushed Teams calls, and once in a windowless room where the coffee had given up before we did. The language is calm. The plan is clean. The consequences are already standing in the hallway, waiting their turn.

A date moves, but nobody wants to call it a slip. A dependency is slipping, but the word problem feels premature. A vendor is cheerful in a way that should concern everyone. A sponsor has promised something nobody checked with delivery. A steering committee would prefer reassurance to accuracy. A “small ask” has arrived smiling and is already looking around for load-bearing walls. Half the team is unavailable, one approval is missing, and the launch is being described as tight but manageable, which is corporate language for prepare yourself.

And there you are. Calendar open. Face neutral. Notebook filling with consequences other people are not yet ready to hear.

This book is about that moment.

Not the polished version of project management. Not the conference-slide version with swimlanes, clean governance, clear decision rights, and diagrams suggesting that alignment is a normal human condition. This book is about the other version.

The version where work begins late but optimism begins on time. Where dates become socially real before they become operationally possible. Where dependencies fail quietly, then all at once. Where executives reassure first and validate later. Where status reporting becomes performance art. In other words: the battlefield.

Projects do not usually collapse because one cartoon villain storms into the room and unplugs the server while laughing. They collapse, distort, drift, or lurch forward because they are built inside systems that reward hope, politeness, reassurance, deference, and momentum theatre long after those things have stopped being useful.

So what do project managers do? We translate fantasy into tradeoffs. We surface consequences people hoped would remain atmospheric. We document what was said, what was meant, what was assumed, and what will now break. We absorb panic without becoming theatrical. Sometimes we save the work. Sometimes we save the appearance of the work long enough for the real work to catch up. Sometimes we hold together impossible situations with sequencing, diplomacy, evidence, and scar tissue while everyone around us refers to this as coordination.

This book is for those people.

It is for the PM who realized during kickoff that the project was already late. It is for the PM who watched a date move left because someone important got enthusiastic in public. It is for the PM who has sat in a steering committee with amber facts and felt the room reach, emotionally, for green. It is for the PM who has heard it's just a small tweak and immediately seen three weeks of testing, four dependencies, two approvals, and a relationship problem walk through the door wearing a pleasant smile. It is for the PM who has survived the weekend rescue and the miracle go-live later described as smooth.

Tales from the Trenches is not a textbook. It is not a sermon about resilience. It is a story-driven survival guide.

Each chapter begins with an impossible situation, because impossible situations are where the real patterns become visible. When the conditions turn hostile, the truth comes out. No fake uplift. No ceremonial optimism. No pretending a clean dashboard means a clean reality.

Welcome to the trenches. Proceed accordingly.

# FREE FIELD RESOURCE

## *Trench Field Notes Kit*

If the scenes in this book feel familiar, do not just nod, wince, and go back into the next meeting unarmed.

The free Trench Field Notes Kit turns the core patterns from this book into five quick field notes and a one-page log you can use when a project starts bending reality.

Use it to capture actual start conditions, hidden tradeoffs, dependency drift, rescue work, and post-miracle lessons before the official story gets cleaner than the work.

Get it through [PMTales.com/free-resources](https://PMTales.com/free-resources)

## CHAPTER 1 - The Project Was Late Before It Began

### FIELD LINE

*Good energy is not a dependency plan.*

### FIELD SCENE

The room had the polite brightness of a kickoff that expected applause from history. The sponsor stood beside a slide titled PROGRAM MOBILIZATION, smiling with the confidence of a man whose dates had been approved by typography. On the wall, a timeline ran from discovery to delivery in one clean uninterrupted line, as if procurement, design decisions, integrations, security reviews, and human endurance had recently become administrative suggestions.

People nodded in the way people nod when nobody wants to be the first person to introduce weather into a ceremony. The PM watched hands circle pastries, watched directors underline the phrase strong alignment, watched a technical lead study her own laptop like it might open a trapdoor if she looked committed enough. Every sentence in the room had the soft polish of something pre-approved for public consumption. Nothing had edges. That was the problem.

Then the sponsor clicked to the dependency slide, which was mostly whitespace and confidence. Integration was “tracking well.” The vendor pathway was “in motion.” Procurement was “being finalized.” Security was “engaged.” These are not dependencies. These are hostage notes written by a committee. The PM looked around the table and realized the project had achieved full executive posture before it had acquired a spine.

He circled three dates in his notebook, all of them impossible for different reasons, then wrote the line that would later explain the whole chapter: The project was late before it began. Nobody in the room said that sentence out loud. They did what institutions do when the foundation is missing: they admired the roof and moved briskly into introductions.

***Some projects do not start behind schedule. They start as fiction.***

He had spent the morning looking for the things that were supposedly in place: the signed scope baseline, the confirmed resource release, the procurement approval, the architecture sign-off, the infrastructure commitment, the legal clearance on the issue everyone kept calling minor, which usually means dangerous later. He had found none of them.

Not exactly none. That would almost have been cleaner. What he found were approximations. Scope was nearly there. Resources were being lined up. Procurement was advancing. Architecture was in discussion. Infrastructure was supportive. Legal was comfortable in principle. Everything was one polite phrase away from existing, which meant nothing existed yet.

A director clicked to the next slide. “As you know, there’s been excellent work behind the scenes to get us here.” This was true in the loosest possible sense.

Then the integration lead spoke. “Sorry,” she said, already sounding sorry for asking, “has architecture review been completed?” The room changed temperature. She had apologized before asking, which told him everything about the room. “We’re in good shape there,” said one of the delivery leads. Which meant no. “It’s progressing well,” the sponsor added. Also no.

The PM looked back at the timeline. Testing started in nine business days. Testing depended on architecture approval. Architecture approval did not exist. Which meant the timeline was not a timeline. It was a decorative belief system.

The meeting moved on. Nobody stopped. Nobody asked whether the word target was doing too much work. The room simply absorbed the missing piece and continued toward optimism at cruising speed.

Next came the resource slide. A neat table showed seven workstreams and seven names. It looked authoritative and managed. Three of the named people had not actually been released. One had verbally supported the effort, which is not the same as joining it. Another had responded to the staffing request with, Happy to help where possible, which is workplace language for absolutely not if anything becomes difficult. And yet there they were. On the screen. Professionally committed by typography.

The PM did not say anything. Sometimes the job is staying calm while the room reveals how much fiction it is prepared to tolerate before lunch.

By the coffee break, the room had formally launched a project that was missing half its organs. People clustered in the hallway saying good session, strong start, lots of momentum, great to finally be underway.

The PM stepped away and made the real list. No signed scope baseline. No confirmed architecture approval. No secured dependency commitment. No final procurement decision. No locked resources. No validated migration method. At the top of the page he wrote: What We Are Pretending Is True. Then beneath it: The project has started.

That was the lie. Not an evil lie. Just the familiar organizational version: a room gets tired of waiting for readiness, so it upgrades hope into status.

He knew what came next. The kickoff would become evidence. Later, when dates slipped or workstreams stalled or people asked why progress was uneven, someone would refer back to this morning as proof that the project had launched properly. The missing pieces would vanish into background radiation. The system would forget what had been absent and begin counting from the pastries.

That is how projects become unfair. They start incomplete, then punish delivery for inheriting the incompleteness.

When the meeting ended, everyone stood. People thanked each other for a productive discussion that had produced several useful illusions and no

actual readiness. The sponsor looked relieved. The director looked pleased. Comms looked fed.

The PM stayed seated until the room emptied. The title slide had returned to the screen. Implementation Roadmap. Still beautiful. Still false.

He sent three emails before anyone could rewrite the day into a clean beginning: one to the sponsor and director listing the startup items that needed confirmation, one to resource managers asking for real availability, and one to himself titled Actual Start Conditions with every unresolved item dated and captured.

That email mattered most. Because later, when the project started taking on water and people began speaking in the tragic passive voice of modern delivery, he would need proof that the trouble had not emerged. It had been present, seated near the pastries, smiling politely through kickoff.

### **WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING**

Some projects do not start with readiness. They start with impatience. The room wants progress. Leadership wants movement. Comms wants a milestone. The organization gets tired of waiting for the parts that are hard to secure and decides to launch anyway. From that moment on, the project is measured as though it started cleanly. Missing prerequisites disappear into the background. The kickoff becomes evidence. The gaps become your problem.

### **SURVIVAL DOCTRINE**

At the start of a project, build two baselines: declared start — what the room says is true — and actual start — what is structurally true. Then defend the second one with your life. List unresolved startup conditions. Turn named support into confirmed support. Convert progressing into dates and owners. Do not inherit fiction silently.

## **ARMORY BOX**

Project Readiness Reality Check:

confirm scope baseline, released resources, approvals, committed dependencies, validated approach, procurement reality, and legal clearance. If half of that is still floating in polite language, the project has not started. It has been introduced.

Projects rarely begin with a dramatic lie. Usually it is something smaller: an approval expected soon, a person assumed available, a dependency everyone feels oddly good about. Then the kickoff happens, the pastries arrive, the room applauds, and the calendar starts counting. Six weeks later, someone asks why delivery is behind.

**PROCEED ACCORDINGLY.**

# “FUNNY BECAUSE THE ALTERNATIVE IS SCREAMING.”

Projects rarely fail all at once. They fail politely, in meetings, in status decks, in softened language, and in rooms that want reassurance more than reality.

*Tales from the Trenches* is a sharp, story-driven survival guide for project managers, delivery leads, and anyone trying to keep difficult work alive inside absurd systems. From fake-green steering committees to impossible dates, hidden rescue weekends, and ‘smooth’ go-lives held together by caffeine and manual workarounds, this book captures the *real theater of delivery work with wit, precision, and trench-level honesty.*

*Inside, you'll find recognizable project disasters, survival doctrine for bad rooms and worse timing, and practical field tools for navigating scope creep, deadline pressure, executive promises, and the strange administrative weather of modern delivery.*

*If you've ever watched a project stay green by social agreement, this book is for you.*

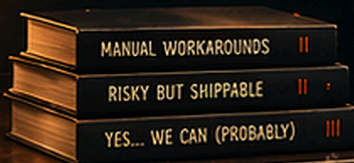
## TODAY'S REALITIES

- SCOPE CREEP
- DATE IS A SUGGESTION
- DEPENDS ON OTHERS
- EXECUTIVE OPTICS
- MIRACLE PLAN

WE'LL  
FIX IT  
LATER

IT'S  
FINE  
(FOR NOW)

WEEKEND  
RESCUE  
SCHEDULED



# PM Tales