

THE UNFORGIVING MINUTE: A SOLDIER'S EDUCATION¹

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I. Introduction

Losano Ridge, named for an American Airman killed in action there, looked like a Louisville Slugger from Lieutenant Craig Mullaney's vantage point.³ He was standing on a bluff in eastern Afghanistan, a mile and a half above sea level and a short distance away from the Pakistani border.⁴ A trail slalomed between boulders and four-foot scrub pines up the ridge's spine.⁵ Mullaney's platoon's mission that day was to clear the ridge to ensure there were no more fighters on it—fighters who had attacked another platoon earlier that day.⁶ To protect his flank, Mullaney would send one of the platoon's squads on foot to patrol a wadi that paralleled the ridge, while the rest of the platoon patrolled the length of the ridge in Humvees.⁷ Mullaney's decision to send his Soldiers into the wadi would prove fateful, as the squad thwarted a coordinated ambush of heavy machine guns, rifles, antiaircraft guns, and rocket-propelled grenades, but his decision would also result in the platoon's first K.I.A., or Soldier "killed in action."⁸

Compiled from author Craig Mullaney's memories, *The Unforgiving Minute* traces his path from first-year cadet, known as a plebe, at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point,⁹ through training at the U.S. Army Ranger School,¹⁰ two years at Oxford University as a prestigious Rhodes Scholar,¹¹ and platoon leader deployed to Afghanistan as a member of the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, of the 10th Mountain Division based out of Fort Drum, New York.¹² Mullaney attempts to determine whether his training as a Soldier, officer, and scholar, prepared him to lead his platoon in its first sustained firefight on Losano Ridge, to deal with his Soldier's death, and to face the consequences of his own actions that day.¹³ Was he ready for that fight?¹⁴

II. Lessons On Leadership

The Unforgiving Minute is, at its heart, a lesson on leadership.¹⁵ The author describes the title theme as the period in combat in which the leader must make real-time decisions that put Soldiers' lives on the line while the enemy continues to fight.¹⁶ For an infantry officer like the author, all of his training prepared him for that minute.¹⁷ He describes his response to

¹ CRAIG MULLANEY, *THE UNFORGIVING MINUTE: A SOLDIER'S EDUCATION* (2009).

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³ MULLANEY, *supra* note 1, at 281.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.* at 280–82.

⁷ *Id.* at 282.

⁸ *See id.* at 284–85.

⁹ *See id.* at 33–34.

¹⁰ *See generally id.* at 88–121.

¹¹ *See generally id.* at 123–81.

¹² *See id.* at 191; *see also* 1st Brigade "Warriors," <http://www.drum.army.mil/sites/tenants/division/1BCT/HQ/index.html> (last visited Oct. 29, 2009).

¹³ *See id.* at 292.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 363 (summarizing a question by a student at the U.S. Naval Academy).

¹⁵ *See id.* at 362.

¹⁶ *See id.* at 285.

the “What do we do now?” moment while bullets, mortars, and other lethalties of war were impacting around his Soldiers and himself.¹⁸

The author begins many of the leadership lessons at West Point and continues to weave them throughout the rest of the book. A lesson on personal responsibility occurs on Reception Day, the author’s first day at West Point and an extremely stress-inducing event for the several hundred new plebes like himself.¹⁹ When the author is brusquely corrected by a senior cadet for not responding with an appropriate answer to the cadet’s inquisition, the senior cadet describes the four permissible answers to respond to a question: “Yes, sir.” “No, sir.” “No excuse, sir.” “Sir, I do not understand.”²⁰ The author illustrates how the response, “No excuse, sir,” hammered the acknowledgement of personal responsibility into his head so that it eventually became second nature—so much so that he uses the response throughout the book to acknowledge, even if in his own mind, his failings and shortcomings as a leader.²¹

The author’s leadership lessons continue at Camp Buckner, West Point’s summer military training camp.²² The emphasis at Buckner is on leadership, and cadets must demonstrate they can build teams and lead Soldiers beyond West Point.²³ The author describes his apprehension at leading cadets just one year younger than himself, with his authority stemming solely from his rank and the fact that he had gone through Buckner the previous summer.²⁴ Mullaney aptly states that leading is at once both simple and difficult.²⁵ For example, he learns early to trust his Soldiers but to verify they are doing the right thing.²⁶ This maxim, “trust but verify,” comes in handy when the author directs the platoon’s fight on Losano Ridge.²⁷ Other concepts, such as leading from the front, are much harder to grasp because they are subtler than they sound.²⁸ The author looks at leadership as a contract between the leader and his Soldiers, where the most productive leader sets the example, leads by that example, and shows loyalty to his Soldiers.²⁹ He learned at Buckner that he served his Soldiers, not the other way around.³⁰ Later, as a platoon leader in Afghanistan, he states, “My part of the contract, the responsibility that came with the privilege of leadership, was never to spend [my Soldiers’] lives cheaply. I carried the weight of that responsibility on every patrol, yet unlike a rucksack or a Kevlar helmet, I could never slip it off when we came back inside the wire.”³¹

¹⁷ See *id.* Prior to the action, the author had completed Infantry Officer Basic Course and U.S. Army Ranger School.

¹⁸ See *id.* at 285.

¹⁹ See *id.* at 4.

²⁰ *Id.* at 5.

²¹ See *id.* at 6, 72, 292. When the author fails a mission during training at Fort Lewis, he responds, “No excuse, sir.” In answering his own questions about the loss of his Soldier, he responds, “No excuse, sir.”

²² See *id.* at 48.

²³ *Id.* at 57.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.* at 58.

²⁷ *Id.* at 288. The author directs much of the fight over the radio, relying on his subordinate leaders to carry out his orders.

²⁸ *Id.* at 58.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.* at 268.

The author also highlights the interrelationship between leadership and competence throughout the book. For example, when leading in the military, details matter.³² At West Point, and later at Fort Drum, he describes having an attention to detail beaten into his head with the regularity of a jackhammer.³³ “Military command, perhaps unlike any other profession, demands its practitioners see with absolute clarity the forest and the trees. Any number of missed details could compromise a mission.”³⁴ On the flip side, a leader must know the difference between the things he could never perfect, and the things he had to.³⁵ Later, comparing competence to unit cohesion, the author states, “[A]ll the cohesion in the world is no substitute for tactical knowledge. Competence [is] the biggest morale booster.”³⁶ The author often pushed his Soldiers to gain technical and tactical knowledge, sometimes at the expense of their comfort.³⁷ But in describing his Soldiers’ many successes, the author makes it clear that such knowledge paid dividends.³⁸ “[M]aking them succeed had given me a satisfaction far greater than any individual achievement. The very act of leading was motivating: I wanted to deserve the men I would one day lead.”³⁹ A Ranger School instructor reinforces the interrelationship between competence and leadership to the author. “You are here for one reason. . . . You are here for the troops you are going to lead. You are responsible for keeping them alive and accomplishing whatever mission you’re given.”⁴⁰

Finally, the book’s soul is a lesson on the importance of relationships. Mullaney highlights three key relationships: his relationship with his father, which ultimately drove him to attend West Point and become an officer;⁴¹ his relationship with his wife, Meena, formed at Oxford and forged under the difficult circumstances of distance and deployment;⁴² and finally his relationship with his Soldiers, formed at Fort Drum but hardened on Losano Ridge.⁴³

The author’s relationship with his father is central to the book. His father wore a hard hat and boots to work for his entire working life.⁴⁴ Mullaney learned from him that responsibility preceded privilege.⁴⁵ He describes his father as the consummate Soldier: competent and indestructible, whose only measure of success was hard work.⁴⁶ The author considered attendance at West Point as a way to connect with his father, but more importantly, as a way to extend those lessons of hard work that his father had instilled in him to his own life.⁴⁷ As he writes, “West Point does not owe you anything. You have to earn it. Every single day.”⁴⁸

The author also dedicates a significant portion of the book to his relationship with his wife. The theme throughout these passages is that their relationship took work. The two met at Oxford but had to suffer, first through the author’s stationing at Fort Drum, his deployment to Afghanistan, and then her attendance at medical school.⁴⁹ It is clear that the author, like many

³² *Id.* at 58.

³³ *See id.* at 24.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.* at 200.

³⁶ *Id.* at 59.

³⁷ *See id.*

³⁸ *See id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 60.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 102.

⁴¹ *See id.* at 13–14.

⁴² *See id.* at 151.

⁴³ *See id.* at 192.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 13.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *See id.* at 14.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 13.

⁴⁹ *See id.* at 205–08.

young officers, felt the challenge of a long-distance relationship with another professional. However, he also makes it clear that both needed to persevere for their relationship to succeed.⁵⁰ The author recites words of encouragement he received from a fellow Oxford classmate who had just spent two years apart from her fiancé: “A long-distance relationship takes hope, good humor, and idealism. It takes a massive dose of courage to protect the relationship at all odds. It is hard, but worth it. You’ll both be stronger as a result.”⁵¹ Such words should be taken to heart by young officers faced with the difficulties of such a relationship.

Finally, the author highlights his relationship with his Soldiers. It is clear that this relationship forms the strongest bond of all. The author endearingly depicts his relationship with his two platoon sergeants,⁵² as well as his relationship with the other Soldiers of the platoon, from his radio operator⁵³ to his heavy weapons squad leader.⁵⁴ His Soldiers are initially wary of their new platoon leader.⁵⁵ Only later, through training and combat, thoughts of physical dominance are replaced by respect and cohesion.⁵⁶ How important the author’s relationship with his Soldiers became is demonstrated on the author’s last day with his platoon. As he is leaving, his platoon sergeant pays him what he describes as the highest compliment he ever received: “You done good.”⁵⁷ He reciprocates the feeling by stating to his Soldiers, simply, “Thanks for the privilege of letting me fight with you.”⁵⁸

III. Criticisms of *The Unforgiving Minute*

Despite the fact that *The Unforgiving Minute* weaves an excellent path through the author’s nine years in the Army, it has its share of drawbacks. First, the author’s expansive vocabulary may serve as a distraction to some readers. For example, the author uses the term “ablutions.”⁵⁹ The author’s choice of words may distract some readers from the book’s main message, and that would be unfortunate, since the themes are so relevant to all readers.

Second, this is not a scholarly analysis of the war in Afghanistan, but a first-hand account. The author cites no sources but states that he relied on personal narratives, notes, unit logs, and other sources of information in developing his concepts.⁶⁰ It would be helpful if the reader had a better idea of where the author retrieved his information. Despite this drawback, the author’s observations are still extremely valuable for the insight they provide into the war. For example, he highlights the inadequate intelligence and resources available to Soldiers deploying to Afghanistan in 2003.⁶¹ He also highlights what he termed the lessons of Afghanistan, loosely summed up as “the closer you look, the less you understand.”⁶²

⁵⁰ See *id.* at 350.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 181.

⁵² *Id.* at 192–93.

⁵³ *Id.* at 261.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 229.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 194. “The platoon sergeant’s acceptance was easier than the rest of the platoon’s.”

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 180–81.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 326.

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 56–57.

⁶⁰ See *id.* at 379–380; see, e.g., Craig M. Mullaney Official Website, *The Unforgiving Minute*—Description, <http://www.craigmmullaney.com/content/book.asp?id=desc> (last visited Sept. 8, 2009).

⁶¹ *Id.* at 218.

⁶² See *id.* at 224.

IV. Application for Judge Advocates

Beyond the areas of leadership and relationships, there are a multitude of invaluable lessons that young judge advocates could gain by reading this insightful account. For example, Mullaney's description of the after-action review process, conducted after the ambush on Losano Ridge, showcases the different perspectives and perceptions various witnesses can have to the same traumatic event.⁶³ Another critical perspective emphasizes the author's struggle with the perception that he could not be both a scholar and a warrior while in the Army.⁶⁴ For example, the author describes how the battalion operations officer constantly belittled his advanced educational background, ribbings he felt bordered on personal attacks.⁶⁵ In one instance, while the author was attempting to learn Hindi in Afghanistan, the officer tells him that his focus would be better spent on becoming a better platoon leader rather than "screwing around" with languages.⁶⁶ Like the author, judge advocates will almost always have more formal education than the Soldiers they advise.⁶⁷ Some of these Soldiers may respect the formal training that goes into being a Soldier-lawyer, but others may not. Judge advocates should be cognizant of these perceptions and be aware of how they might impact their relationships within their areas of operations.

V. Conclusion

The Unforgiving Minute is an excellent choice from the recent wave of first-person narratives produced by junior officers participating in the Global War on Terrorism.⁶⁸ As this conflict enters its eighth year, a resource such as *The Unforgiving Minute* provides important lessons and insights, not only to today's young Soldiers, but also to the general public. The author's leadership, dedication to duty, and personal struggles will inspire empathy among his fellow Soldiers but will also provide civilian readers with a re-assuring look into the thoughts and feelings of a capable young leader. Civilians and Soldiers alike will be able to effectively gain from the author's insights.

⁶³ See *id.* at 295–96.

⁶⁴ See *id.* at 303.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ See GoArmy.com, Army JAG Corps—Requirements, <http://www.goarmy.com/jag/requirements.jsp> (last visited Sept. 8, 2009).

⁶⁸ See, e.g., DONOVAN CAMPBELL, *JOKER ONE* (2009).