

## Book Reviews

### War<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Major Jacob D. Bashore\*

*The willingness to die for another person is a form of love that even religions fail to inspire, and the experience of it changes a person profoundly.*<sup>2</sup>

#### I. Introduction

As the war in Afghanistan moves into its tenth year and American casualties are at an all time high,<sup>68</sup> few books are of such relevance and interest as Sebastian Junger's<sup>69</sup> *War*. Do not be fooled by the title, this book is about much more than battles that encompass a war. Junger uses his experiences in Afghanistan with 2nd Platoon, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade to paint a vivid picture of an infantryman's life, thoughts, and actions in one of the most volatile areas of Afghanistan—the Korengal Valley.

At first glance, Junger's statement that he wants to see what "it's like to serve in a platoon of combat infantry"<sup>70</sup> suggests that the reader is about to relive the firefights that make up an infantryman's deployment, much akin to a Vietnam "trash novel." However, Junger's purpose was not to just tell another war story. Junger mixes psychological studies and research into the experiences of 2nd Platoon in order to convey what these Soldiers thought, how they felt, how they bonded with their fellow Soldiers, and how the interspersed months of intense periods of combat and boredom affected their psyche. Although Junger spends a great amount of time telling the reader about his own thoughts and focuses little on how the unit operated outside of combat power, Junger did an excellent job relaying the story of 2nd Platoon during this deployment.

#### II. Background

Junger embedded with 2nd Platoon shortly after the unit's arrival to Afghanistan in May 2007. Over the next

year, Junger, along with photojournalist Tim Hetherington,<sup>71</sup> would spend nearly five months over five trips living the life of Soldiers in combat. During their experiences with the platoon, they shot over 150 hours of video that Junger used to ensure accuracy in his writing of *War*.<sup>72</sup> In addition, they used that video to produce the newly released and critically acclaimed documentary titled *Restrepo*.<sup>73</sup>

While Junger occasionally tells the story of Soldiers outside 2nd Platoon, the majority of this book is spent with the infantrymen of 2nd Platoon at a rustic hilltop outpost called Restrepo in the Korengal Valley, Afghanistan. The Korengal Valley is the site of some of America's most tragic events since the war in Afghanistan began. In June 2005, this valley was the site of the crash of a Special Operations Chinook helicopter which killed sixteen service members, including eight Navy SEALs.<sup>74</sup> In July 2008, the Taliban attack at Wanat killed nine and injured twenty-seven of 2nd Platoon's brothers from C Company just prior to C Company's redeployment.<sup>75</sup> Outpost Restrepo was named after 2nd Platoon's medic who was killed early in the unit's deployment, and Junger vividly describes the sparse outpost that lacked all the creature comforts of home—running water, electricity, hot food, communication with the outside world, and privacy.<sup>76</sup>

#### III. Organization and Content

*War* contains three separate sections titled Fear, Killing, and Love. Each section focuses on an emotional phase that

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<sup>1</sup> SEBASTIAN JUNGER, *WAR* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 239.

<sup>68</sup> David Nakamura, *U.S. Troop Deaths in Afghan War Up Sharply*, WASH. POST, Sept. 1, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/31/AR2010083100610.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Sebastian Junger is the author of the bestselling books *The Perfect Storm* and *A Death in Belmont*. Junger has reported on conflicts in Afghanistan since 1996 to include being embedded with Tajik fighters against the Taliban in 2000. JUNGER, *supra* note 1, at 25, 217.

<sup>70</sup> *Id.* at 25.

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<sup>71</sup> Hetherington published a photo book based on this same deployment. TIM HETHERINGTON, *INFIDEL* (2010).

<sup>72</sup> *Id.* at xi.

<sup>73</sup> *RESTREPO: ONE PLATOON, ONE YEAR, ONE VALLEY* (Outpost Films 2009). The movie won the Grand Jury Prize for a documentary at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival. *RESTREPO*, <http://restrepothemovie.com> (last visited Feb. 15, 2011). *Restrepo* was also nominated for a 2011 academy award for feature documentary. THE ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES, <http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/83/nominees.html> (last visited Feb. 15, 2011).

<sup>74</sup> JUNGER, *supra* note 1, at 49–52. The crash occurred during an attempt to rescue four Navy SEALs under attack by Taliban forces. John Barry & Michael Hirsh, *Chopper Down Over Kunar: A Special Ops Unit Calls for Help, and a Rescue Goes Awry*, NEWSWEEK, July 11, 2005, at 31, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/2005/07/10/chopper-down-over-kunar.html>.

<sup>75</sup> JUNGER, *supra* note 1, at 253–60.

<sup>76</sup> *Id.* at 62–65.

the combat Soldier experiences, closely following the chronological course of a deployment—overcoming fear by demonstrating courage and bravery; dealing with the necessity and the desire to kill; and the brotherhood bond formed amongst fellow Soldiers. Junger’s goal was to convey “what war actually feels like.”<sup>77</sup> To accomplish his objective, Junger uses the combat actions of 2nd Platoon to discuss the psychological effects on the Soldiers over time. Where Junger’s efforts fall short is that the book often focuses on his personal feelings about combat as an untrained, middle-aged journalist with no military background,<sup>78</sup> and disproportionately focuses on the comments of one Soldier, Sergeant Brendan O’Byrne.

Junger does an outstanding job painting the picture of what it is like to be an infantryman in 2nd Platoon, and accurately captures nearly all of the military terminology and descriptions.<sup>79</sup> *War* is written at a level that requires no prior military experience to understand what Junger is trying to convey, making it easy for the reader to stay interested. However, the book is only a “page-turner” in the first half of the second section—Killing. The book keeps moving by constant insertion of stories demonstrating the courage and bravery shown by the 2nd Platoon Soldiers in combat with Taliban forces, to include the heroics of recent Medal of Honor awardee Specialist (now Staff Sergeant) Salvatore Giunta.<sup>80</sup> The reader can hear their hearts pounding, feel the emotions that course through their bodies, and see the effort exerted by the heavily laden Soldiers in the hot, high altitude climate. However, the book’s momentum is consistently halted when these accounts of battle are frequently interrupted with discussion on the psychological studies of Soldiers.<sup>81</sup>

While Junger does a thorough job explaining the battles in plain terms, the book lacks several key features which would help the reader understand the battles and dynamics of the platoon. First, *War* lacks critical diagrams to lay out

the terrain and Soldier movements in the book’s main firefights. The book only includes one diagram, which is a generic diagram of the valley showing only some of the referenced locations mentioned throughout the book.<sup>82</sup> At times, the reader does not have a full understanding of how the Soldiers were being attacked, how the terrain affected the engagements, and how the Soldiers used that terrain to respond to the attacks.<sup>83</sup> In addition, the *War* reader only obtains a good understanding of the terrain if the reader watches the documentary *Restrepo*.<sup>84</sup> A few additional diagrams and pictures of the terrain would have solved this confusion and made the reading more enjoyable.

Second, Junger never describes the platoon’s organization. Last names are often thrown at the reader without ranks or positions. We never learn the first names of some of these Soldiers, such as Rice, Hajar, and Solowski, which makes it difficult to see how they fit into the platoon’s dynamic.<sup>85</sup> While some of the Soldiers may have moved around during the deployment, a diagram showing all of the members of each squad would have gone a long way in helping the reader, particularly the military reader who is attempting to analyze the interrelation of the platoon members as it applies to their personal experiences in order to understand how and why they interacted with each other.

#### IV. Analysis

As one young Soldier told the author prior to a mission, “It’s okay to be scared, you just don’t want to *show* it.”<sup>86</sup> While often misplaced in the middle of a battle account, Junger’s best work is synthesizing psychological studies of Soldiers from past wars to explain to the reader why 2nd Platoon’s Soldiers felt and acted the way they did. His most interesting discussions centered on how training helps groups to overcome fear and fight as a unit rather than as individuals,<sup>87</sup> and how the human spirit is the key to Soldiers overcoming perceived exhaustion, noting that “good leaders know that exhaustion is partly a state of mind” and those “. . . who succumb to it have on some level decided to put themselves ahead of everyone else.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Id.* inside front cover.

<sup>78</sup> For example, Junger discusses in detail his pre-mission fears and his own emotional struggles after an improvised explosive device attack on a vehicle in which he was riding. *Id.* at 71–74, 143–50.

<sup>79</sup> The military savvy reader is distracted by misstated facts that all officers graduate Officer’s Candidate School and that the military occupational specialty (MOS) for a tank mechanic is 67H. *Id.* at 20–21, 13. While an Abrams tank mechanic used to hold the MOS of 63A, the MOS was 91A at the time *War* was published. *Enlisted MOS Changes*, ARMY TIMES, May 16, 2009, [http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/05/army\\_enlisted\\_chart\\_051609w/](http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/05/army_enlisted_chart_051609w/).

<sup>80</sup> JUNGER, *supra* note 1, at 117–19, 124–25. Taliban forces split Specialist Giunta’s patrol in two by using a complex “L” shaped ambush. Specialist Giunta saved a fellow Soldier from capture by assaulting through the kill zone to the cut off forward element, where he killed one enemy fighter and wounded another who were dragging away his wounded comrade. *See also* Michelle Tan, *A Hero Lives to Tell*, ARMY TIMES, Sept. 20, 2010, at 22.

<sup>81</sup> For example, during the ambush of Specialist Giunta’s patrol, Junger breaks away from the story to discuss studies on overcoming fear, bravery, and Soldiers fighting as a unit. JUNGER, *supra* note 1, at 117–25.

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<sup>82</sup> *Id.* at ix.

<sup>83</sup> Two key sketches that should have been added for Operation Rock Avalanche would have better described the initial mission brief and a major attack on 2nd Platoon during the operation. *Id.* at 92–114.

<sup>84</sup> *RESTREPO: ONE PLATOON, ONE YEAR, ONE VALLEY* (Outpost Films 2009). While photographs are not essential to a good book, since a photojournalist accompanied Junger, it is strange that there are no photographs of the Soldiers or of the area in which 2nd Platoon operated.

<sup>85</sup> *Id.* at 67–70.

<sup>86</sup> *Id.* at 74 (emphasis in original).

<sup>87</sup> *Id.* at 120–24.

<sup>88</sup> *Id.* at 72–74.

Junger also explains in detail why Soldiers form a brotherhood of love that causes them to put their own safety at risk in order to protect their fellow Soldiers because “courage [is] love.”<sup>89</sup> Junger succinctly argues that this phenomenon does not span all ranks of Soldiers, but is particularly strong only at the company level and below.<sup>90</sup> Junger uses scenarios from the war with Mexico, World War I and World War II to demonstrate how humans who “feel valued and loved by others” in their group will continue fighting for the group, even if it means personal death.<sup>91</sup> Sergeant O’Byrne indicates the power of this sentiment when he told Junger while on emergency leave, “I got to get back [to Afghanistan]. Those are my boys. Those are the best friends I’ll ever have.”<sup>92</sup>

This bond of brotherhood becomes stronger when a unit experiences intense situations, such as combat. However, not all combat experiences result in a positive outcome. Junger reveals some of the negative effects of combat by describing how 2nd Platoon came to literally cheer the death of their enemy in a way that made him feel very uncomfortable.<sup>93</sup> Junger comments, “I got the necessity for it but I didn’t get the joy.”<sup>94</sup> Junger poses the important question, “Is that [gain of] territory worth the psychological cost of learning to cheer someone’s death?”<sup>95</sup> Junger exhibits the breadth of that cost by describing the fear among some troops that they will “never again be satisfied with a ‘normal life,’”<sup>96</sup> and by describing the toll that the deployment took on Sergeant O’Byrne, who had a difficult time reintegrating into garrison life upon redeployment.<sup>97</sup> Thus, Junger illustrates important lessons for today’s military leaders to grasp in order to proactively help Soldiers during reintegration and to better understand how to deal with the Soldiers who lose that expected level of discipline in garrison life.

Where Junger did a great job in explaining the human psyche as it relates to Soldiers in combat, the reader must be careful to not take every one of his assertions as being applicable to all combat Soldiers. Junger’s experiences are primarily based on one isolated platoon during a single deployment where Junger admittedly received the most

outspoken thoughts from one troubled Soldier, Sergeant O’Byrne.<sup>98</sup> I will further discuss some discipline issues of the platoon below, but Junger’s account makes it clear that 2nd Platoon dealt with various mental issues, illustrated by his photojournalist questioning whether the platoon had “demons.”<sup>99</sup>

One specific outlandish assertion that Junger makes is that “the long-term success or failure [of the war in Afghanistan] has a relevance of almost zero [to Soldiers].”<sup>100</sup> If Junger was trying to make the point that the national cause is not why men fight and die for each other, he failed to state that. While Junger correctly states that a cause does not have to be “righteous and . . . winnable” to get men to fight, citing to the German Army’s solidarity in the last months of World War II,<sup>101</sup> his assertion is an overly broad one.

Junger’s assertion that the greater victory is of no consequence to combat Soldiers is both inaccurate and contradicted in other parts of the book. For example, Junger cites to a study that specifically lists “conviction for their cause” as a reason American troops had the “X-factor” during World War II.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, Junger acknowledges that if the Soldiers he interviewed thought he was trying to write on “dying in a senseless war,” they would refuse to talk to him.<sup>103</sup> The refusal to speak to a biased reporter is hardly the apathy that Junger initially describes. Having had several friends die in the current overseas contingency operations, our success is very important to me personally because to quit or fail would mean their lives were lost in vain. Not being the only one to hold this sentiment,<sup>104</sup> if the author derived this attitude from 2nd Platoon, it should not be attributed to Soldiers as a whole.

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<sup>89</sup> *Id.* at 239–46.

<sup>90</sup> *Id.* at 241–42.

<sup>91</sup> *Id.* at 243.

<sup>92</sup> *Id.* at 129.

<sup>93</sup> *Id.* at 153–55.

<sup>94</sup> *Id.*

<sup>95</sup> *Id.* at 155.

<sup>96</sup> *Id.*

<sup>97</sup> *Id.* at 265–68. See also *id.* at 232–35 (Junger’s observations of Sergeant O’Byrne “crawling out of his skin” during a lull in operations initiates a discussion on the effects of taking a Soldier out of combat being very “traumatic”).

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<sup>98</sup> *Id.* at 5–6. Junger consistently cites Sergeant O’Byrne’s statements and describes the issues that Sergeant O’Byrne dealt with to include being shot by his own father as a teen, overindulgence of alcohol both before and after deployment, and going absent without leave upon returning from the deployment. *Id.* at 15, 166–68, 265–68.

<sup>99</sup> *Id.* at 159.

<sup>100</sup> *Id.* at 25.

<sup>101</sup> *Id.* at 242–44.

<sup>102</sup> *Id.* at 122. Junger cites to psychiatrist Herbert Spiegel’s studies and assertion that the X-factor caused the American Soldiers to be “‘influenced greatly by devotion to their group or unit, by regard for their leader and by conviction for their cause. In the average soldier, which most of them were, this factor . . . enabled men to control their fear and combat their fatigue to a degree that they themselves did not believe possible.’” *Id.*

<sup>103</sup> *Id.* at 134.

<sup>104</sup> Sara A. Carter, *Troops Chafe at Restrictive Rules of Engagement, Talks with Taliban*, THE EXAMINER, Oct. 19, 2010, [http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/politics/Troops-chafe-at-restrictive-rules-of-engagement\\_talks-with-Taliban-1226055-105202284.html](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/politics/Troops-chafe-at-restrictive-rules-of-engagement_talks-with-Taliban-1226055-105202284.html) (detailing Soldier’s opinions that American lives will have been wasted if the Karzai government brokers a peace deal with the Taliban).

## V. What Does *War* Do For Today's Military Leaders?

While *War* is an interesting read, it is not about to supplant professional reading list mainstays such as *Once an Eagle*<sup>105</sup> or *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*.<sup>106</sup> For the judge advocate, there is little "meat" in the book to help a judge advocate advise commanders in the current environment. For the inexperienced leader, the book is just as likely to misguide on acceptable standards of conduct as it is to give the leader an idea of how to build a cohesive fighting team.

For the judge advocate, *War* is sparse on key topics of deployment such as the rules of engagement (ROE) and counterinsurgency principles (COIN). Judge advocates must become experts of the ROE and it is important to understand what the infantryman on the ground is experiencing as judge advocates analyze issues such as hostile intent.<sup>107</sup> However, Junger's book only mentions ROE situations on a few occasions, and his writing lacks the depth required to develop many discussion scenarios.<sup>108</sup>

Further, Junger only briefly mentions the COIN concept. Junger describes an operation early in 2nd Platoon's deployment that caused civilian casualties and the local elders to declare jihad. Since Junger was not writing on COIN, there was neither focus on how to rebuild the trust with the local nationals to avoid such catastrophes nor any discussions on how integration of the Afghan security forces could enhance the unit's likelihood of success.<sup>109</sup>

To better understand the complicated counterinsurgency environment at the platoon level, I would recommend reading *The Defense of Jisr al-Doreaa*, written by two former company commanders, rather than *War*.<sup>110</sup> *The Defense of Jisr al-Doreaa* chronicles the story of a platoon leader who applies lessons learned in a COIN environment through six dreams in which his platoon is responsible for

defending a bridge in a small town in Iraq.<sup>111</sup> While a work of fiction, the book more accurately illustrates the complex environment young leaders face when attempting to implement and reinforce the fundamental principles of COIN.

The new military leader should read *War* with caution and not presume that 2nd Platoon's dynamic is normal or the standard. Junger describes several irregularities in the platoon such as their ritual beatings of each other. This was not just horseplay caused by boredom, but the beatings became the accepted practice of the members against each other and their own leadership. Within minutes of a new platoon leader arriving during the deployment, he was pounced on and "[e]very man t[ook] a turn."<sup>112</sup> What was the purpose? Sergeant O'Byrne commented that "if [the new platoon leader] doesn't take it, . . . we just won't listen to the [expletive]."<sup>113</sup> This is certainly not the type of leadership that the Army is trying to infuse in our young noncommissioned officer corps even if it was acceptable in this company.<sup>114</sup>

Another example of indiscipline was 2nd Platoon's panache for engaging in firefights in flip-flops and t-shirts.<sup>115</sup> While there are certainly times that this situation cannot be helped, fighting without personal protective equipment not only violates nearly every standard that senior leaders try to instill but also puts the Soldiers at extreme risk of injury or death. In another incident, the platoon chases a cow into concertina wire before spearing and eating it. In response to inquiries by the local elders and their company commander, the platoon lies about how the cow died.<sup>116</sup> As a result, the local nationals were not justly compensated<sup>117</sup> nor were COIN principles properly advanced.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> *Id.*

<sup>112</sup> JUNGER, *supra* note 1, at 158 (the one noted exception was the platoon sergeant who just watched).

<sup>113</sup> *Id.* at 159. Junger's objectivity has to be questioned when he states that "lesser troops would never have even thought of [beating their platoon leader]," insinuating that only the best infantry platoons engage in this type of behavior. *Id.*

<sup>114</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 6-22, ARMY LEADERSHIP ¶ 3-17 (12 Oct. 2006) ("[Noncommissioned officer] leaders are responsible for setting and maintaining high-quality standards and discipline . . . and setting the example for [Soldiers.];" *id.* ¶ 3-61 ("Part of being a responsible subordinate implies supporting the chain of command.").

<sup>115</sup> *Id.* at 22, 152-53 (describing what appears to be a bunch of "cowboys" as opposed to disciplined Airborne Soldiers).

<sup>116</sup> *Id.* at 199-202.

<sup>117</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY ¶ D-36 (15 Dec. 2006) (stating that claims for wrongful acts of "U.S. forces may be paid to promote and maintain friendly relations with the host nation").

<sup>118</sup> *Id.* ¶ 7-25 ("One of the insurgents' most effective ways to undermine and erode political will is to portray their opposition as untrustworthy . . ."); Memorandum from General David H. Petraeus, to the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Civilians of NATO ISAF and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, subject: COMISAF's Counterinsurgency Guidance (1 Aug. 2010), available at <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/caat-anaysis->

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<sup>105</sup> ANTON MEYER, ONCE AN EAGLE (1968) (classic novel demonstrating the military's core values and leadership techniques).

<sup>106</sup> JOHN A. NAGL, LEARNING TO EAT SOUP WITH A KNIFE: COUNTERINSURGENCY LESSONS FROM MALAYA AND VIETNAM (2005) (detailing lessons learned in fighting an insurgency from a historical perspective).

<sup>107</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 1-04, LEGAL SUPPORT TO THE OPERATIONAL ARMY ¶¶ 5-20, A-11 (15 Apr. 2009).

<sup>108</sup> For example, Junger briefly describes one situation where the company commander's request for an aerial strike is denied, but Junger does not describe how the commander's impassioned plea provided sufficient facts to meet the ROE standard when the approval authority subsequently orders the bomb drop. *Id.* at 115.

<sup>109</sup> JUNGER, *supra* note 1, at 96-100. 2nd Platoon did have Afghan National Army elements with them throughout the deployment, they were just rarely mentioned as Junger's focus was on the American infantryman's life, thoughts, and actions, and not how to operate in a COIN environment.

<sup>110</sup> See generally MICHAEL L. BURGOYNE & ALBERT J. MARCKWARDT, THE DEFENSE OF JISR AL-DOREAA (2009).

## VI. Conclusion

Junger's *War* vividly describes an infantryman's life, thoughts, and actions while effectively using previous psychological studies and examples to guide the reader in understanding how Soldiers think. However, the story must be viewed in perspective of this one platoon during this one deployment. This book fails to provide many good lessons

on leadership or how to be successful in Afghanistan, but the book does provide the reader some interesting points to ponder and gives the layperson a window into the environment of a deployed infantryman. With those caveats in mind, I would definitely encourage someone who is looking to learn about the experiences of Soldiers in Afghanistan to read *War*.

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[news/comisaf-coin-guidance.html](http://news/comisaf-coin-guidance.html) (identifying twenty-four points to success in a counterinsurgency that includes acting with integrity and building the trust of the local populace).