

Gentlemen Bastards: On the Ground in Afghanistan with America's Elite Special Forces¹

Reviewed by *Captain Israel D. King**

I think it is hard to argue with the statement that Special Forces are America's most elite [S]oldiers. It is not because they can shoot the straightest, run the fastest, or do the most push-ups. What makes them special are their smarts. They are the smartest [S]oldiers on the battlefield. They can beat you with a handshake after a long negotiation just as easily as with a bullet.²

I. Introduction

In the fall of 2010, journalist Kevin Maurer journeyed to southern Afghanistan to follow the U.S. Army Special Forces.³ This would not be his first exposure to this highly select group⁴—he had already spent a significant amount of time with the Special Forces on other trips abroad.⁵ But this trip was going to be different.⁶ This time, he would have the access and the experiences he needed to write the sequel to Robin Moore's action-packed nonfiction novel *The Green Berets*.⁷ For ten weeks, Maurer accompanied the members of Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 7316 as they worked to bring peace and stability to Kandahar Province, the birthplace of the Taliban.⁸ Ultimately, Maurer would be disappointed in his search for the kind of thrilling stories he had hoped to find.⁹ Instead, what he would experience is a no less important story about the quieter side of war.¹⁰

Gentlemen Bastards is Maurer's effort to give his story shape, to show the reader what life is like for the members of a Special Forces team when they are not in the thick of battle.¹¹ Writing from a first-person perspective, Maurer places the reader in his own shoes and allows the reader to see with Maurer's eyes as he describes the difficulties Special Forces teams encounter while training Afghan

counterparts, interacting with conventional units, and conducting missions that test their ability to win the "hearts and minds" of the populace.¹²

Through his narrative, an underlying theme emerges: the Special Forces approach to counterinsurgency is in every way superior to the conventional approach.¹³ Maurer's arguments along this line provide the context for the book's central thesis: Special Forces teams should be untethered from conventional control so that they can have the independence they need to be most effective.¹⁴ To support his thesis, Maurer often seizes the opportunity to portray conventional units in a negative light, characterizing their understanding and application of counterinsurgency strategy as inadequate, misguided, and even counterproductive in comparison with their Special Forces brethren.¹⁵

Despite the force of his arguments in support of the Special Forces, Maurer's biases and lack of objectivity undermine his credibility and thereby weaken his thesis. Ultimately, Maurer's arguments do not persuade. However, despite its flaws, *Gentlemen Bastards* remains an entertaining read that poses intriguing questions on the proper relationship between conventional and Special Forces units, offers valuable lessons on how to effectively apply counterinsurgency strategy, and evokes a vivid picture of life in southern Afghanistan at the dawn of the current decade that a judge advocate reader will appreciate if he selects the book for pleasure reading rather than for pure professional development.

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¹ KEVIN MAURER, *GENTLEMEN BASTARDS: ON THE GROUND IN AFGHANISTAN WITH AMERICA'S ELITE SPECIAL FORCES* (2012).

² *Id.* at 1.

³ *Id.* at 4–5.

⁴ *Id.* at 4.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.* at 2.

⁷ *Id.* at 2, 5.

⁸ *Id.* at 1, 24.

⁹ *Id.* at 5.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*; see also U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY para. A-5 (15 Dec. 2006) ("Once the unit settles into the [area of operation], its next task is to build trusted networks. This is the true meaning of the phrase 'hearts and minds'").

¹³ See generally MAURER, *supra* note 1, at 1–18 (discussing the history of the Special Forces along with its key accomplishments, core competencies, and expertise in counterinsurgency efforts).

¹⁴ *Id.* at 237–39.

¹⁵ See *id.* at 62 (describing a deficiency of training and know-how among conventional units), 66 (arguing that the infantry's affiliation with Governor Tooryalai Wesa damaged the military's credibility with the populace due to Governor Wesa's purported corruption), 134 (discussing the lack of effort by a conventional unit to build rapport with the civilian population within their battlespace).

II. Background

Maurer currently works as a reporter for the *Wilmington Star News* in Wilmington, North Carolina.¹⁶ Before joining the *Star News* in 2011, Maurer worked as a reporter for the *Fayetteville Observer* in Fayetteville, North Carolina.¹⁷ It was while working at the *Observer* that Maurer's managing editor gave Maurer the opportunity to write about the military at nearby Fort Bragg.¹⁸ Over his eight years with the *Observer*, Maurer would gain an intimate familiarity with the Special Forces, culminating in five embeds with Special Forces units abroad.¹⁹ Aside from *Gentlemen Bastards*, Maurer's writing credits include co-authoring *Valleys of Death: A Memoir of the Korean War*; *Lions of Kandahar: The Story of a Fight Against All Odds*; *No Way Out: A Story of Valor in the Mountains of Afghanistan*; and *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission That Killed Osama Bin Laden*.²⁰

III. The Special Forces/Conventional Unit Struggle

The setting for Maurer's tale is Afghanistan in the midst of President Obama's surge, the effort that, in late 2009, brought an additional 30,000 troops into Afghanistan to beat back a resurgent Taliban and build a stable Afghan government.²¹ Maurer believes that the surge, with its emphasis on building stability as a precursor for an American withdrawal, provided the impetus needed to allow Special Forces to escape the raid-based mission structure foisted upon it by the military establishment and get back to doing what it does best: training indigenous forces and building support for the government from the bottom up.²²

Maurer's goal is to observe and record the actions of a Special Forces team as it executes these twin missions within the context of Village Stability Operations (VSO).²³ When that plan falls through, Maurer settles for the less exciting prospect of embedding with ODA 7316 as it mentors a battalion of Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) who are destined for deployment to the Zhari

District of Kandahar Province.²⁴ Maurer quickly begins the work of integrating into ODA 7316, and it is at this early stage that he begins to introduce the reader to the tensions that exist between the Special Forces and conventional units.²⁵ But it is not until Maurer accompanies ODA 7316 into the field that this tension escalates and assumes a prominent place in the narrative.

Maurer conceptualizes this tension as a struggle between the desire of Special Forces for more independence and the desire of conventional commanders for more control.²⁶ Maurer's position that the Special Forces must have more independence to operate effectively is supported by a series of illustrations designed to contrast Special Forces virtues with conventional vices. For example, when ODA 7316 encounters infantry units "cowering" in their bunkers wearing body armor to protect against persistent rocket attacks, Maurer makes it sound obvious that unit leadership should take a page from the Special Forces playbook and send out patrols to kill or capture the attackers.²⁷ Later, when ODA 7316's team leader meets with a conventional brigade commander, Maurer portrays the team leader as eminently reasonable while depicting the conventional commander as a buffoon whose only purpose in the meeting was to showcase his ego and let the team leader know who is boss.²⁸ The reader comes away from these illustrations feeling as if conventional units are so incompetent that they lack any standing upon which to contest the view that Special Forces should be allowed to operate independently. Unfortunately, this approach overly simplifies what is an inherently complex issue.²⁹

IV. The Weaknesses of Maurer's Writing

Ultimately, Maurer overextends himself in his effort to glorify the Special Forces at the expense of conventional units and leaders. Had Maurer taken a different approach and made it clear that he had considered other points of view, he would have been more persuasive. Unfortunately, there is nothing in Maurer's writing to indicate that he took

¹⁶ Topics—Kevin Maurer, STAR NEWS ONLINE, <http://www.starnewsonline.com/section/topic/0115> (last visited July 28, 2014).

¹⁷ MAURER, *supra* note 1, at 4.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Books, KEVIN MAURER, AUTHOR, <http://kevinmaurer.net/books/> (last visited July 28, 2014).

²¹ JOSEPH J. COLLINS, UNDERSTANDING WAR IN AFGHANISTAN 81–84 (2011).

²² MAURER, *supra* note 1, at 13.

²³ *Id.* at 13–14.

²⁴ *Id.* at 20.

²⁵ See *id.* at 40–47. In spending time with the members of Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 7316 on the boardwalk of Kandahar airfield, Maurer highlights the thinly-veiled disgust the Special Forces have for nearly everyone they see, individuals who, in Maurer's words, "do everything but fight the war." *Id.* at 40.

²⁶ *Id.* at 237–39.

²⁷ *Id.* at 89–91.

²⁸ *Id.* at 162.

²⁹ See generally MAJOR GRANT M. MARTIN, SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND CONVENTIONAL FORCES: HOW TO IMPROVE UNITY OF EFFORT USING AFGHANISTAN AS A CASE STUDY (2009), available at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA513467> (identifying challenges and recommending solutions to the unity of effort problem between Special Operations Forces and conventional units).

this approach. Not once does Maurer discuss any efforts he made to talk to conventional leaders and incorporate their perspectives. Nor does he attempt to reassure the reader that his opinions are informed by a review of the scholarly literature by citing to authorities who have weighed the issue.³⁰

Although Maurer's uneven approach to his subject matter is disappointing, it is not unexpected given Maurer's apparent biases. From the very beginning, Maurer makes it clear that his goal is to lose his objectivity while he is in Afghanistan.³¹ In his own words, he wants to go "all in."³² Later, as Maurer recounts his efforts to integrate into ODA 7316's culture, the reader is left with the distinct impression that Maurer's attempts to ingratiate himself are motivated just as much by hero worship as by a desire to cultivate rapport.³³ Finally, once Maurer has earned his place on the team, he confirms his bias by expressing his contempt for conventional forces and stating unequivocally that he has taken on the mindset of a Special Forces member.³⁴

V. Alternate Viewpoints

While Maurer does a less-than-stellar job of supporting his arguments, it would be a mistake to dismiss his theories out-of-hand. The ultimate question of what relationship Special Forces units should have with conventional units remains open. Linda Robinson, the author of *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces*, has expressed the view that a loose leash is best given that Special Forces training is designed to create a Soldier capable of great innovation while remaining within the bounds of law and policy.³⁵ In her opinion, the Special Forces are "at greater risk of being straitjacketed by conventional-minded commanders, fearful bureaucrats, and technology that fosters micromanagement than of becoming rogue agents running rampant."³⁶ On the other hand,

³⁰ He could have cited to numerous authorities. The tension between Special Forces and conventional units is a popular topic in the Special Forces literature. See ROBIN MOORE, *THE GREEN BERETS* 208–14 (1965) (describing an encounter between a Special Forces major and a conventional unit colonel); see also LINDA ROBINSON, *MASTERS OF CHAOS: THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE SPECIAL FORCES* 153–89 (2004) (using case studies to support the argument that Special Forces units in Afghanistan have worked better when they have more autonomy).

³¹ MAURER, *supra* note 1, at 5–6.

³² *Id.* at 5.

³³ See *id.* at 42 (where Maurer describes his efforts to integrate into ODA 7316 as trying to fit in with the "cool kids"); see also *id.* at 34 (where Maurer describes his efforts to do well on the shooting range as an attempt to maintain his "cool points" with the Special Forces team).

³⁴ *Id.* at 64.

³⁵ ROBINSON, *supra* note 30, at 366.

³⁶ *Id.*

Douglas Waller, author of *The Commandos: The Inside Story of America's Secret Soldiers*, expresses the view that more external control of the Special Forces and other special-operations groups is necessary precisely because of their strengths:

So intensely focused are they on mission, they can become tunnel-visioned to larger strategy. So close do they become to the turmoil on the ground, "they are almost proud of the fact that broader political questions aren't their concerns," says RAND Corporation analyst Benjamin Schwartz. So rigorous is their selection, so gruelingly thorough their training, they can be blinded by a can-do attitude.³⁷

Although a review of military scholarship on the issue reveals an effort to reconcile competing Special Forces and conventional-unit interests, the presence of personality conflicts and struggles over power and influence within the calculus makes this problem a tough nut to crack.³⁸

VI. Lessons Learned

While Maurer's writing is weak in some areas, it remains strong when he sticks to recounting his personal experiences, particularly when he explores and enlivens subject matter that many writers would consider boring or unworthy of comment.³⁹ As remarked by one reviewer, *Gentlemen Bastards*, rather than dwelling on combat, "presents the 95 percent of wartime experience that is much more common—a daily, punishing grind that saps motivation and makes each day a little more tedious than the one that came before."⁴⁰

Of particular interest to the military reader are the chapters in which Maurer explores the interactions between the members of ODA 7316 and their Afghan counterparts. The Americans face significant challenges from the very beginning: the Afghan battalion commander is absent, the commander's executive officer is more interested in getting handouts than doing his job, and the troops themselves are

³⁷ DOUGLAS C. WALLER, *THE COMMANDOS: THE INSIDE STORY OF AMERICA'S SECRET SOLDIERS* 369 (1995).

³⁸ See generally MARTIN, *supra* note 29.

³⁹ See generally BEN STEELMAN, *Review—Gentlemen Bastards a Fine Account*, STAR NEWS ONLINE (Sept. 12, 2012, 12:30 AM), <http://www.starnewsonline.com/article/20120902/ARTICLES/120839942>.

⁴⁰ NATHAN S. WEBSTER, *Book Review: Gentlemen Bastards by Kevin Maurer*, WAR ON TERROR NEWS (Nov. 26, 2012), <http://waronterrornews.typepad.com/cgtwa/2012/11/book-review-gentleman-bastards-by-kevin-maurer.html>.

unmotivated and occasionally insubordinate.⁴¹ To overcome these challenges, the Americans have to apply techniques that run the full length of the counterinsurgency spectrum: they build rapport, treat their counterparts like equals, serve as the example, enforce discipline, and share freely of themselves and their expertise.⁴²

The lesson the reader can glean from these pages is that when working to build capacity in the Afghan security apparatus, the key to success is caring as much about one's partners and their success as much as about oneself.⁴³ Fortunately, the Special Forces example is one that others can benefit from, as the problems they encounter are not unique.⁴⁴ Conventional Soldiers who mentor and train Afghan security forces are likely to encounter similar issues, as are judge advocates who deploy in support of Rule of Law and Security Cooperation operations.⁴⁵ These groups would do well to take heed of what the Special Forces can teach, particularly given the likelihood that U.S. forces will continue to serve in support-and-advisory roles in Afghanistan into the foreseeable future, even beyond the planned pull-out in 2014.⁴⁶

VII. Conclusion

After taking into account issues with Maurer's credibility and the reliability of his exposition, Maurer's arguments fail to persuade the reader of the truth of his thesis. However, despite its deficiencies, *Gentlemen Bastards* is well worth the read. First, the issues he raises do much to inform the reader of the conflict that exists between the Special Forces and conventional units, and provide a good starting point for further study on this topic. Second, the book gives us a rare and valuable insight into the mindset of the Special Forces. Third, Maurer offers poignant depictions of military operations and Special Forces interactions with Afghans at the lowest levels, depictions that should assist judge advocates and other Soldiers as they work to accomplish their own counterinsurgency missions. Always thought-provoking and entertaining, *Gentlemen Bastards* deserves a place on the reader's shelf.

⁴¹ MAURER, *supra* note 1, at 51, 52–57, 116–20.

⁴² *Id.* at 76, 125, 154.

⁴³ *Id.* at 188.

⁴⁴ See generally CTR. FOR LAW & MILITARY OPERATIONS, THE JUDGE ADVOCATE GEN.'S LEGAL CTR. & SCH., U.S. ARMY, RULE OF LAW HANDBOOK: A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE FOR JUDGE ADVOCATES 207–25 (2011) (describing challenges facing Rule of Law operations in Afghanistan).

⁴⁵ While deployed in support of Afghan Rule of Law operations in 2011, this reviewer encountered difficulties in dealing with Afghan counterparts that eerily mirror those that faced ODA 7316. By understanding and applying the counterinsurgency principles evinced by the Special Forces, judge advocates will be much better equipped to foresee potential difficulties and attack them head-on.

⁴⁶ Kristina Roman, *Some U.S. Troops to Stay in Afghanistan After 2014*, WASH. TIMES, Sept. 8, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/8/some-us-troops-to-stay-in-afghanistan-after-2014/print/>.