

# Outlaw Platoon: Heroes, Renegades, Infidels, and the Brotherhood of War in Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Major Mark W. Malcolm\*

*Here are your sons, America. These are the men you've thrown into the fire. This is their story, and it is one of achievement and love, triumph and victory.*<sup>2</sup>

## I. Introduction

I start with a confession: I am not a voracious reader. And although I enjoy learning about military history, rarely do I go out of my way to read books on the subject. However, in *Outlaw Platoon: Heroes, Renegades, Infidels, and the Brotherhood of War in Afghanistan*, I discovered a story that I struggled to put down and was sad to see end. Sean Parnell, with the assistance of renowned author John R. Bruning,<sup>3</sup> crafts a riveting and remarkably detailed first-hand account of one infantry platoon's experience during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Notwithstanding its slight imperfections, this tale is must-read material for anyone who seeks to understand the bonds forged by combat and the incalculable human cost of war.

## II. A Brief Summary

Lieutenant Sean Parnell was a fresh-faced Army Ranger in 2006<sup>4</sup> when he deployed from Fort Drum, New York, to the Bermel District of Afghanistan<sup>5</sup> as the leader of Third Platoon, Bravo Company, Second Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment.<sup>6</sup> "Outlaw Platoon," as the unit nicknamed itself,<sup>7</sup> spent sixteen months downrange.<sup>8</sup> The unit patrolled and fought in often mountainous terrain along the Pakistani border, a spot that Parnell calls "one of the most dangerous places on the face of the planet."<sup>9</sup> During this time, the platoon endured repeated hostile engagements with a smart and rugged enemy force. A partial list of awards earned by

Outlaw Platoon members during their OEF tour demonstrates the astonishing hardships they faced: seven Bronze Stars (including five for valor), twelve Army Commendation Medals for valor, and thirty-two Purple Hearts.<sup>10</sup>

The author's stated purpose in writing the book was to "chronicle [his] soldiers' incredible journey"<sup>11</sup> in Afghanistan, "to tell the world of their amazing accomplishments[,] and to secure their place in American military history."<sup>12</sup> "My goal," Parnell says, "was to show the world their sacrifices and, in doing so, provide readers with a much-needed window into the heart of American infantry soldiers everywhere."<sup>13</sup>

Parnell's account is based on his memory and interviews with his Soldiers.<sup>14</sup> He arranges the story in generally chronological fashion, doubling (or flashing) back from time to time to offer context.<sup>15</sup> Parnell successfully utilizes two main visual aids: a straightforward map to orient the reader to the locations that he references,<sup>16</sup> and a set of photographs that give the reader a chance to match faces to character names.<sup>17</sup>

## III. The Book's Many Strengths

The book has a myriad of strengths. A few positive points were identified above, but others merit special mention. The story is largely written in accessible prose. Parnell sweeps the reader in with vivid details about the people, places, and things he encounters.<sup>18</sup> Naturally, because the book is about the Army, it contains a high volume of acronyms and terms of art. Parnell is wise to

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<sup>1</sup> SEAN PARNELL WITH JOHN R. BRUNING, *OUTLAW PLATOON: HEROES, RENEGADES, INFIDELS, AND THE BROTHERHOOD OF WAR IN AFGHANISTAN* (2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 368.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at back jacket notes (indicating that Bruning has authored or co-authored fifteen non-fiction books and that Bruning "embedded with coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2010" as part of his preparation for this book). *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 1, 55.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at xi.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at vii.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 83. The "Outlaw Platoon" moniker appears to have emerged from a pre-deployment bar brawl in which the unit's members prevailed. *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at ix.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at x.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> For example, as Parnell flies over Afghanistan in a Chinook helicopter, he starts discussing the Christmas that he had spent with his family two months before. *See id.* at 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at xi. The map shows the Bermel District of Afghanistan and highlights key engagements, towns, bases, posts, and routes. *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> *See id.* 182–83 (photographs of several prominent characters, including the author).

<sup>18</sup> *See, e.g., id.* at 1. Parnell uses clear, vibrant imagery such as "a vast dragon's back of peaks and valleys" to describe the Afghan landscape. *Id.*

include a thorough glossary,<sup>19</sup> which enables the layperson—including the judge advocate who lacks infantry experience—to follow along with relative ease.

The story has a you-are-there quality that envelops the reader and lends power to Parnell's message.<sup>20</sup> In particular, the biographical profiles of his platoon members are extraordinarily effective in emotionally connecting the reader to the book's colorful characters.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the text, one cannot help but alternate between empathy and sympathy for the Soldiers of Outlaw Platoon, and that is a credit to Parnell's writing.

For all of the gory, frightening, and heart-rending sequences in the book, the one time that I was compelled to exclaim aloud was when Parnell learned of his unit's unexpected 120-day extension in theater.<sup>22</sup> Parnell had so skillfully described the sense of relief, triumph, and wistfulness he felt when the helicopter arrived to start his subordinates on their journey home<sup>23</sup> that when he thereafter broke the news to the reader about the extension, it took the form of a literary punch to the gut. In that moment, the shock and despair that Parnell experienced was palpable.<sup>24</sup> This is a testament to Parnell's success in cultivating empathy and realism in his narrative.

Finally, through his gripping recitation of events, Parnell accomplishes three feats that should be considered acts of public service. First, he drives home the fact that the members of Outlaw Platoon have been asked to bear an immense burden for their country.<sup>25</sup> As Parnell describes, this burden revealed heroes;<sup>26</sup> spotlighted weak links;<sup>27</sup> stole youth, innocence,<sup>28</sup> and good health,<sup>29</sup> and created an eternal

connection between a group of individuals who were prepared to die for each other.<sup>30</sup> As the United States enters its thirteenth year of armed conflict in Afghanistan, Parnell unintentionally<sup>31</sup> puts to the reader the hard question of whether whatever strides we have made in Afghanistan are worth the extraordinary price that he and his troops have paid.

Second, in a highly credible and articulate way, he communicates the lost understanding and lack of common ground between himself and most of those to whom he considered himself close prior to his combat experiences.<sup>32</sup> Parnell speaks for legions of warriors who have difficulty reintegrating at home after living through the unmatched intensity, exhilaration, and horror of war.<sup>33</sup> Our nation will be struggling with the issue of how best to embrace and care for these veterans for years to come.

Third, Parnell forces the reader to confront the unhappy truth that so many of our alleged partners and allies in and around Afghanistan are unreliable at best, and nefarious at worst. From an apparently corrupt Afghan Border Police commander,<sup>34</sup> to an enemy spy acting as Outlaw Platoon's interpreter,<sup>35</sup> to Pakistani military forces who willingly act as human shields for the bad guys,<sup>36</sup> to Afghan villagers who fail to warn our troops of an imminent threat even after receiving American help,<sup>37</sup> the picture is grim. In some ways, it makes the reader admire and revere the sacrifices of the Outlaws all the more, but it also makes one re-evaluate the wisdom of the United States' strategic-level mission in Afghanistan as it has evolved since our initial invasion. It prompts the reader to wonder what victory in OEF looks like, and whether the efforts of Parnell and his Soldiers—however noble and super-human—get us closer to securing that victory.

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 381–84.

<sup>20</sup> *See id.* at 165–206 (where Parnell renders a transfixing account of his unit's nearly six-hour battle on 10 June 2006, in which Outlaw Platoon was almost overrun).

<sup>21</sup> One such profile is that of the platoon's young amateur economist and political scientist, Specialist Pinholt. *See id.* at 20–23.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 354.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 350–53.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 354–55.

<sup>25</sup> *See, e.g., id.* at 356–59 (discussing Parnell's own struggles with traumatic brain injury, Outlaws who were killed in action, and the emotional reunion with a wounded and beloved squad leader, Staff Sergeant Baldwin).

<sup>26</sup> *See id.* at 184. Doc Pantoja (a medic) treats Baldwin after Pantoja had himself suffered a ghastly facial injury, all while a seriously wounded Baldwin clamors to re-enter the fight. *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *See id.* at 189–90 (detailing how Sergeant Waites mentally froze in battle).

<sup>28</sup> *See id.* at 363–64. Parnell feels out of place with his pre-Army friends and their trivial chatter about sports, etc. *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *See, e.g., id.* at 356–57 (addressing the effects of Parnell's traumatic brain injury).

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<sup>30</sup> *See id.* at 243, 350–53. Parnell reflects on acts of “selflessness” by his Soldiers amid life-threatening situations, and later talks about the tremendous bond that had formed within the platoon. *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> *See id.* at ix (expressly stating that the book is not “a review of U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan”).

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 363–66. Parnell writes that his “circle of friends grew smaller and smaller, until only a few stayed close to [him].” *Id.* He laments the trouble he has relating to civilian pals who “had never seen a rocket or heard the sound of a [sniper rifle] echoing off mountain slopes. They'd never seen a child die either.” *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 366–70.

<sup>34</sup> *See id.* at 37–48 (discussing Parnell's interactions with Major Ghul of the Afghan Border Police).

<sup>35</sup> *See id.* at 312–18 (addressing the discovery that Yusef, an interpreter for the Outlaws, had betrayed them).

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 253.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 303.

#### IV. The Book's Few Shortcomings

Portions of the dialogue—particularly during firefights—were implausible. One stark example occurs during close combat east of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Bermel on 10 June 2006.<sup>38</sup> Parnell's company commander had just entered the scene, and the author proceeds to brief his boss on the current situation: "Half my men are down, sir. They're attacking in two elements. Two platoons plus. We're out of ammo and need to get our seriously wounded out of here."<sup>39</sup> This dire report is immediately followed by one of the nearby Outlaws laughingly telling a sergeant about how he had sustained his head wound.<sup>40</sup> As the latter conversation happens, the group is dodging enemy fire, and the enemy is advancing to positions "mere meters" away from the chatting Soldiers.<sup>41</sup> Given the circumstances, it is simply inconceivable that the second exchange would have occurred in the manner in which Parnell documented it. This type of flaw in the storytelling was sometimes distracting.

Although only so much can be accomplished in less than 400 pages,<sup>42</sup> glaring unresolved issues remained at the book's end. Early in the deployment, Parnell described Lieutenant Dave Taylor as a close friend and colleague.<sup>43</sup> Understandably, the relationship soured mid-tour after Taylor accused Parnell of poor leadership.<sup>44</sup> Parnell suspected that Taylor's accusations arose from Taylor being fed inaccurate information,<sup>45</sup> but there was no mention throughout the rest of the book about even an attempted reconciliation. Perhaps the resolution of this part of the story did not survive the final editorial cut. Regardless, it was an odd omission.

Also excluded was any extensive discussion of the platoon's last 120 days downrange—i.e., the period of their extension.<sup>46</sup> Some unit members had already returned home to their families when they learned that they were being ordered back to the fight for another four months.<sup>47</sup> Parnell talks about hearing this news from his battalion commander and about the severe blow that the news dealt to unit morale,<sup>48</sup> but notably absent is a substantial discussion of the

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 160.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 197.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 198.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 384 (the last numbered page).

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 5, 120.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 222. Taylor claims that Parnell was "reckless" in battle and asks if Parnell "even care[s]" about his own Soldiers. *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 354.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 354–55.

events that transpired on the ground during those last several weeks "in country."

Parnell's flashbacks to childhood indignities and scenes of loved ones occasionally seemed melodramatic and gratuitous.<sup>49</sup> Although Parnell effectively employed the device at certain times,<sup>50</sup> in other instances it felt contrived.<sup>51</sup>

Anyone who has spent an appreciable amount of time with combat arms leaders knows that they traditionally refer to the Soldiers of their unit as "the men" or "my men."<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Parnell's constant use of this phrase is anachronistic and arresting. A gender-neutral term such as "Soldiers" or "troops" would do just as well, and would be more in step with a 21st-century Army.<sup>53</sup>

Even more disconcerting was the pejorative—albeit fleeting—use of the word "gay."<sup>54</sup> At one point, Parnell says that "[j]ust hearing [a reference to love among platoon members] in my head sounded gay enough."<sup>55</sup> Parnell is neither the first, nor will he be the last, Soldier to reflexively use this sort of language, but to do so is flatly unacceptable.<sup>56</sup>

#### V. A Weakness Turned Strong

Thankfully, Parnell acknowledges in his postscript that he had painted "fobbits"<sup>57</sup> with too broad a brush in the main

<sup>49</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 85, 86. Parnell's initial reference to his grandfather's funeral was strangely placed smack in the middle of a firefight narrative.

<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 165–66. Parnell's invocation of his grandfather's voice—urging him to rise after being knocked unconscious—worked well in this instance. It did not break the stride of the story.

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 81–82. This is another example of the flashback technique being an irritant. Parnell abruptly starts talking about a school bus bully from his childhood during an engagement with the enemy. *Id.*

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at x. These phrases appear throughout the book.

<sup>53</sup> Women will be serving in more combat roles in the coming years. See Craig Whitlock, *Military Plans to Open More Combat Jobs to Women by 2016*, WASH. POST (Jun. 18, 2013), [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-06-18/world/40044470\\_1\\_combat-jobs-men-and-women-secretary-leon-e](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-06-18/world/40044470_1_combat-jobs-men-and-women-secretary-leon-e).

<sup>54</sup> PARNELL, *supra* note 1, at 245.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., Amaani Lyle, *Hagel, Obama Advisor Salute Gay, Lesbian Military Community*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (Jun. 25, 2013), <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=120359> (illustrating that the highest levels of the chain of command regard gays and lesbians as vital and valued members of the military family).

<sup>57</sup> PARNELL, *supra* note 1, at 206. Parnell equates fobbits with "POGs (Personnel Other than Grunts)." *Id.* For another definition, see Austin Bay, *Excerpt: Embrace the Suck*, NAT'L PUBLIC RADIO (Mar. 8, 2007), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7457988> (defining "fobbits" as a "[d]erogatory term for soldiers who never leave a [forward operating base (FOB)]").

body of the text.<sup>58</sup> He received a letter from a unit supply specialist named Corey Brass with whom Parnell had served at FOB Bermel—a letter that Parnell describes as a “wake-up call.”<sup>59</sup> Brass was dismayed by Parnell’s almost uniformly unkind characterizations of the “fobbits” whom he encountered in Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup> Brass informed Parnell that Brass’s fiancée had left him after he told her that the unit’s deployment was being extended.<sup>61</sup> “The ‘fobbits’ gave up something too,”<sup>62</sup> Brass wrote. “For some it cost them their marriage and for some it cost them their life.”<sup>63</sup> Parnell was moved to include an excerpt of Brass’s letter in the book, and to state that “all of us sacrificed to be out there on the edge of the Hindu Kush.”<sup>64</sup> In so doing, Parnell “set right a wrong.”<sup>65</sup>

cadre of disciplined, dedicated, close-knit professionals who stand ready to defend our nation’s interests—often at the expense of these individuals’ own, more immediate personal interests. The reader may also come away from the story struggling to discern whether our country has asked too much of the Outlaws and others like them, and whether their heroism has been properly appropriated by their government. By giving rise to weighty questions such as this, Parnell’s eloquent and engaging book has perhaps achieved more than he ever envisioned.

## VI. Conclusion

*Outlaw Platoon* is equal parts inspiring and tragic. The reader comes away from the book buoyed by the forceful reminder that within America and its Army is a self-selected

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<sup>58</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 206. The author—here and elsewhere—exhibits disdain for fobbits as a group.

<sup>59</sup> *Id.* at 370.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 371–72.

<sup>61</sup> *Id.* at 371.

<sup>62</sup> *Id.* at 372.

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*

<sup>64</sup> *Id.* at 370.

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*