



Sebastian Junger's **WAR**

An Unvarnished Look at Our Soldiers in Afghanistan

Emma Vialpando

THE ORIGINS OF the surrealist movement in the early 20th century were influenced by an aesthetic of contradictory convergence in which opposite elements intermingle to create energetic clashes of energy and movement. This ironic merging of contradictions can also manifest itself within combat zones and is on full display in Sebastian Junger's recent book, *War*, which juxtaposes the seeming simplicity of military tactics with the cacophony and friction of combat, the boredom of waiting for the next operation with the adrenaline-pumping rush of a firefight, the brotherly bonds of war with the lonely isolation of dealing with one's fear. Broken into three parts that in many ways embody the visceral nature of combat—fear, killing, and love—*War* delves into the world of a combat infantry unit and provides an unvarnished picture of our modern-day Soldiers.

Between the spring of 2007 and 2008, Junger made five trips to the Korengal Valley and was embedded with the Soldiers of the 2d Platoon, Battle Company, 173d Airborne Brigade. A *Vanity Fair* correspondent, Junger is no stranger to placing himself in highly dangerous environments. Before writing *War*, he was embedded with a unit in Afghanistan's Zabul Province, and he also spent time in the Niger Delta profiling Nigerian militants attacking U.S. oil and gas infrastructure. However, he admits that he was unprepared for the level of violence in the Korengal Valley.

Situated in northeastern Afghanistan, the Korengal Valley is a mere six miles wide and six miles long, and is in many ways "the Afghanistan of Afghanistan: too remote to conquer, too poor to intimidate, too autonomous to buy off." Battle Company's objective is to block mobility corridors of insurgents, who are traipsing back and forth along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and bringing men and supplies with them. A large part of this mission involves the Sisyphean task of hauling heavy loads up steep hills to secure the higher ground: "Wars are fought with very heavy machinery that works best on top of the biggest hill in the area and used against men who are lower

Emma Vialpando is a national security consultant in Washington, DC.

down. That, in a nutshell, is military tactics, and it means that an enormous amount of war-fighting simply consists of carrying heavy loads uphill.”

One of Battle Company’s key tasks is to build an outpost—named Restrepo after a fallen comrade—on a hilltop overlooking the valley. Other construction projects focus on development efforts such as paving roads and transportation routes in an effort to gain the support of the local civilians. Development projects, however, seem to lag behind schedule. The primary focus appears to be gaining territorial dominance. In the documentary, *Restrepo*, created by Junger and British cameraman Tim Hetherington, the company commander believes the Restrepo Outpost is a “middle finger” to the insurgents because it means that U.S. troops have the territorial advantage. It represents one of the unit’s most successful achievements.

During this period, Battle Company is also the “tip of the spear” in Afghanistan. Nearly 70 percent of the bombs dropped in Afghanistan were in and around the Korengal Valley, and these 150 Soldiers encountered nearly one-fifth of all combat operations in Afghanistan. At times there was a routinized battle structure that developed in which U.S. troops conducted daily patrols until they confronted the enemy and a firefight ensued. Once troops were in contact, they called in their massive firepower and the insurgents knew that they had about 30 minutes until the Apaches and the A-10s arrived. Even with the airpower advantage, each Soldier in the platoon carries anywhere between 80 and 120 pounds of guns and ammunition—an oxymoronic light infantry.

Moreover, the men of Battle Company face a grueling and austere environment of “axle-breaking, helicopter crashing, spirit-killing, mind-bending terrain that few military plans survive intact even for an hour.” Often they only eat one hot meal a day, tarantulas frequently invade their living space, they can go for days or weeks without showering, and they are cut off entirely from their friends, family . . . and women.

What kind of young men are drawn to this environment, and in many cases, volunteer to be sent to the front lines?

Ironically, many of the men within this unit are accidental Soldiers. What draws many of these 20-somethings to the war front is rarely the political

disagreements between the U.S. government and the Taliban insurgents. For a few, military service represents a family tradition. For some, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 motivated their decision to join the military. However, for a majority of the men, boredom, staying out of jail, or simply getting their lives straightened out are common reasons for joining the military. Reading the conversations of the Soldiers feels, in many ways, like eavesdropping on a group of fraternity boys: touting their hunting adventures at home; practicing pick-up lines on each other; and even speculating about the possibility of masturbating during a firefight. For most, the war does not represent an extension of politics; rather, fighting in Afghanistan offers them an unforeseen opportunity to feel utilized and to remake themselves among the shale and holly trees in the Korengal Valley.

For many of these men, combat is a game they fall in love with. For starters, combat can be exciting. Enveloped in a cacophony of activities—from the spitfire of artillery, to covering fellow Soldiers, to dodging bullets that travel faster than the speed of sound—combat can pump so much adrenaline that fear dissipates into the background. The relatively calm and composed nature of the Soldiers under such unimaginable conditions—at least for most civilians—is a testament to their steely professionalism. In fact, it seems that the Soldiers are more apprehensive when they are not fighting because during these times they have less control over events.

More than excitement, combat can attract young men because everything takes on a significant importance. Even mundane activities such as drinking water and staying hydrated become important. If a Soldier is dehydrated, he could endanger the whole group by falling behind on a patrol or tipping off the enemy because his urine gives off a concentrated stench. Soldiers cannot only think of themselves but must elevate the group’s needs above their own. The protection and

For many of these men, combat is a game they fall in love with.

survival of the platoon becomes the greater cause: “The defense of the tribe is an insanely compelling idea, and once you’ve been exposed to it, there’s almost nothing else that you’d rather do . . . collective defense can be so compelling—so addictive—that eventually it becomes the rationale for why the group exists in the first place.”

This pledge to each other provides the men with a clear and certain purpose—something that many do not have outside the combat zone. It also creates unbreakable ties among men that provide them unwavering reassurance, protection, and moral support.

Simultaneously, there is deep isolation that accompanies combat, and many of the Soldiers tend to compartmentalize and suppress discussion regarding disturbing, personal emotions. Fear is obviously an emotion that each one experiences; however, there seems to be an unspoken rule not to discuss it. The official military support system also appears to be in line with this approach. When one of the men goes to the counselor to unload, he is advised to start smoking cigarettes to help relieve his stress:

Anderson sat on an ammo crate and gave me one of those awkward grins that sometimes precede a confession. “I’ve only been here four months and I can’t believe how messed up I already am,” he said, “I went to the counselor and he asked if I smoked cigarettes and I told him no and he said, ‘Well, you may want to think about starting.’” He lit a cigarette and inhaled. “I hate these fuckin’ things, he said.

The constant suppression of haunting memories takes its toll. Some men become numb, some are unable to reintegrate into a non-combat environment, and many take a host of psychiatric meds. The sweeping of combat’s psychological impacts under the proverbial rug provides a disturbing realization how, as a society, we are short changing our Soldier’s

Although the intent of the book is not to discuss the overarching Afghanistan strategy, it nonetheless provides keen insights into the larger conflict.

long-term mental well-being for their short-term “warrior ethos.”

Overall, *War* provides an unadulterated and revealing glimpse of the rhythms of day-to-day combat at the tactical level. An award-winning author who wrote *The Perfect Storm*, Junger has a flair for vivid literary illustrations. His raw descriptions of combat can make you feel as if you are reading the script for the next Hollywood blockbuster, but in these scenes, the blood and iron are not stage props.

However, upon finishing the book, I felt distressed. Although the intent of the book is not to discuss the overarching Afghanistan strategy, it nonetheless provides keen insights into the larger conflict. In April 2010, the U.S. military left the Korengal Valley not because we had declared “victory” but because we realized that the area was not a terrorist hotbed. Rather, the secondary and tertiary effects of our presence sparked much of the fighting. The area surrounding many U.S. outposts had traditionally been a main conduit for the lumber industry. By some accounts, when American Soldiers first came into the Valley in 2002, they aligned themselves with a northern Safi tribe, which ignited armed resistance from local lumber cutters who believed that the northern Safis were looking to take over their traditional operational area. Reflecting on these larger dynamics and sub-dynamics, I wonder if often we are sending our accidental Soldiers to fight accidental terrorists. **MR**