

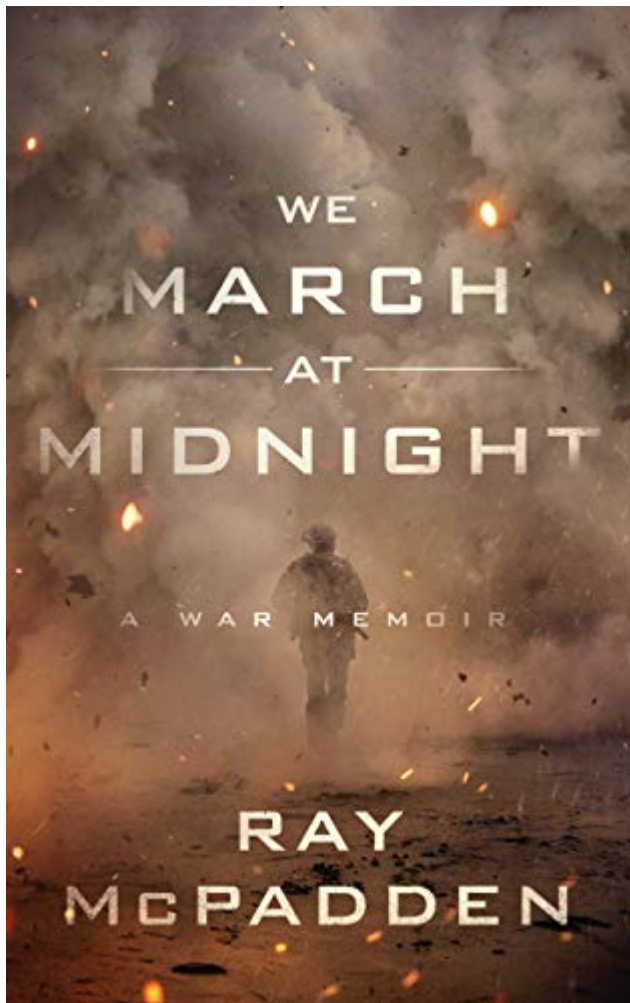
Peter Molin's Strike "Through the Mask!": Three Vignettes

Memoirs written by soldiers and Marines who fought in the Second Battle of Fallujah in Iraq and the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan portray many events that caused their authors anguish. Below I describe three particularly wrenching episodes. More than narratives of harrowing combat action, they illustrate the emotional strife wrought by war.

The first two episodes are from Ray McPadden's memoir *We March at Midnight*. McPadden served as a US Army platoon leader in 1-32 Infantry, 10th Mountain Division, on a 15-month deployment to the Korengal and then on a subsequent redeployment there with the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment.

The third episode is from Alexander Saxby's *Fallujah Memoirs: A Grunt's Eye View of the Second Battle of Fallujah*. Saxby, a rifleman in 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, recounts his participation in the house-by-house fighting in Fallujah in November 2004.

As you read my summaries of the events, consider what would you have done if you were in the authors' boots and how would you feel about the events now.



The Powerless Lieutenant

Late in McPadden's first tour in the Korengal, he and his platoon are visited by their battalion commander (a lieutenant colonel) and command sergeant major (the senior enlisted soldier in the battalion). McPadden and his men have been in the field throughout their deployment, seeing much fighting and also engaging extensively with local nationals on more peaceable terms. They have endured a long, cold winter without many amenities, and as McPadden puts it, "climbed every mountain in Kunar twice." McPadden and his men clean-up as best they can for the visit, for they sense it is as much an inspection as a friendly chance to thank the platoon for a long, hard job well-done. Throughout *We March at Midnight*, McPadden recounts a love/hate relationship with his chain-of-command. On one hand, he idealizes his company commander and battalion commander as soldier-warriors he hopes to impress.

However, he also often finds them out-of-touch with the actual circumstances he and his men face and prone to issuing orders that are impossible to fulfill.

The visit begins well, but then goes horribly wrong. A soldier in McPadden's platoon attempts a funny retort to a question from the sergeant major and the sergeant major, a by-the-book stickler for order-and-discipline, is not amused. He rips the soldier a new one, and then orders the soldier to pack his bags; the soldier is unceremoniously being removed from the platoon. By the sergeant major's book, an insubordinate wise-ass given to pop-off answers has no place in the unit, no matter how good a fighter he has been or how entrenched he is in the platoon family. The platoon, already short-handed as a result of combat death and injury, must now endure the last few weeks of deployment without one of their beloved members and a trusted fighter.

The soldier is crushed, and McPadden stands there dumbfounded. He appeals to the battalion commander, but the colonel is anything but sympathetic. "It's decided," he retorts, "Trust me, we are doing you a favor," as if he too believed the soldier was a cancer that needed excising for the good health of the platoon. McPadden, suddenly aware how powerless he is and how capricious is his chain-of-command, stands paralyzed as the soldier packs his gear and stows it in one of the colonel's trucks. McPadden writes:

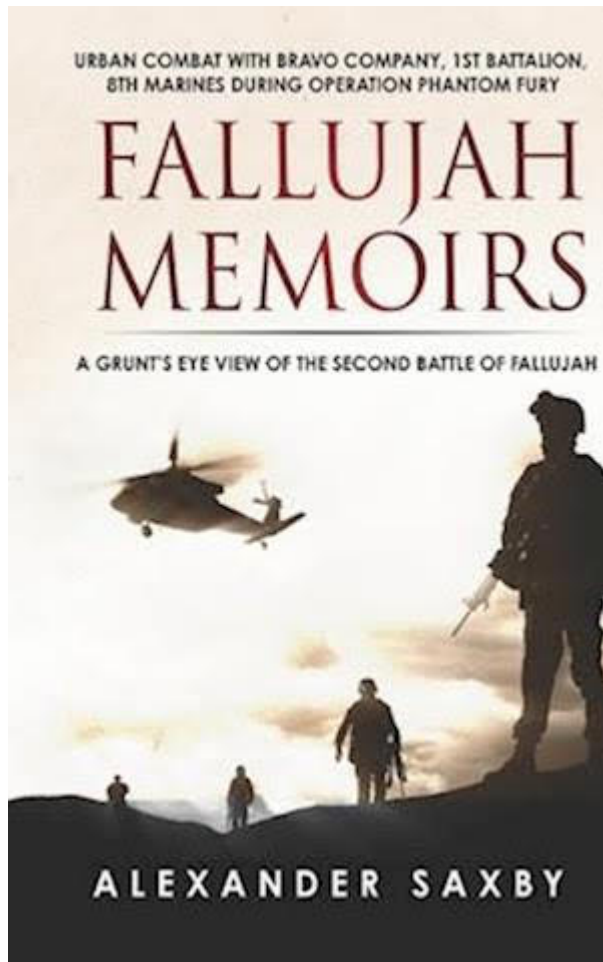
Minutes later the colonel's convoy departs with [the soldier] crying in the back seat of the second Humvee. I cannot stop thinking about this little warrior, crying at being removed from his platoon and squad, destroyed at being forced off the battlefield.

Former Friend, Now a Foe

Toward the end of his tour in the Korengal with 1-32 Infantry,

McPadden befriends a local policeman named Abdul, who then becomes McPadden's partner in several military, infrastructure, and governance projects. McPadden and his men are invited into Abdul's home for meetings and meals, where they meet his family and are always extended hospitality. All good, but two years later McPadden returns to the Korengal as part of a Ranger strike-force charged with killing-or-capturing Taliban leaders. As one mission unfolds, McPadden finds himself and his Rangers lined up outside Abdul's residence. An Afghan male emerges from the compound and is shot dead by the Rangers. McPadden makes a funny quip about the man's death rattle, but upon inspecting the body recognizes the man as Abdul's father. The Rangers then raid the residence and McPadden follows his men inside. There, he sees Abdul lined up against the wall with the other detainees. McPadden writes:

His aquiline nose I will never forget. If this were a movie, at this point, we would lock eye and one of would say something with tremendous gravity. In reality I freeze, then spin away and duck out of the house, fearing Abdul has seen my face. I do not know what he would say to me, whether he'd insist this is a mistake and plea for release or maybe admit to being bad. Perhaps he will blame me for everything that afflicts his homeland: poverty, lack of social mobility, decades of civil war, scarce natural resources, corruption, economic instability, and religious fanaticism. I don't really know. I do know that when we shot Abdul's dad, I mimicked his death sound perhaps to convince myself that I didn't care about these people. In any case, I decide the worst thing would be Abdul failing to remember me at all.



Death in a Minaret

A week into the Second Battle of Fallujah, on Alexander Saxby's birthday, a good friend of Saxby's is killed. Saxby's unit fights on, and later they assault a mosque from which they are taking fire. They return fire and then enter the mosque and climb to the top of the minaret. At the top, they discover the now-dead bodies of two insurgents who are obviously not Iraqi nationals. Confirming the presence of foreign fighters is a high priority information request from Saxby's higher headquarters and also of interest to two *New York Times* journalists embedded with Saxby's platoon.

A few hours later, Saxby describes to the two journalists the foreign fighters lying dead in the minaret. The journalists want to see the bodies for themselves, and the fighting calm for the moment, they convince Saxby's platoon leader to assign a squad to escort them back to the mosque for photographic

documentation. Saxby doesn't go, but another of his good friends, Bill Miller, is part of the journalists' escort. Unbeknownst to the patrol, the mosque has now been reoccupied by insurgent fighters. As Miller leads the journalists to the top of the minaret, he is shot and killed.

That evening, Saxby and one of the journalists are on the roof of a house the Americans have occupied. Saxby writes:

The New York Times reporter was sitting near us, trying to get a signal to send out his stories. He looked at me and asked what I had gotten for my birthday. I didn't even look at him when I said, "Two dead friends." I knew it would be many years before I celebrated my birthday again, assuming I made it past the next few weeks.

I have described the scenarios starkly and solely from the point-of-view of the authors. McPadden's colonel and sergeant major may have seen more troubling signs than McPadden realized. Abdul, as McPadden notes, may have been a Taliban or Taliban sympathizer all along. The two journalists in Saxby's account actually do have their say in later pieces (links below).

That's all fair, and the confluence of perspectives have potential to change the thrust of the stories I have described. But that's not work I will do here, and would probably be of little use to McPadden and Saxby. In the moment, and for years after, events occur on the battlefield that forever impress themselves on the participants without easy or satisfactory resolution. The average ordinary circumstances of deployment and combat are challenging enough, but sometimes an extra-added quirk or fillip of circumstance elevates the average and ordinary into the overwhelming and unfair. Soldiers rely on training, their mission orders, their instincts, and their sense of what their rank-and-duty role entails to see them through, but nothing prepares McPadden and Saxby for the events described above. Power, or powerlessness,

is at the heart of the issue in each vignette, but not simply in the form of being subject to the cruelty of rank. The vignettes speak to the powerlessness of soldiers in the face of circumstances they couldn't have seen coming and whose unintended consequences place undue demands on their ability to make sense of them.

The *New York Times* reporter in Saxby's vignette is Dexter Filkins, the author *The Forever Wars*, an excellent journalistic account of the Global War on Terror campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. With Filkins is photographer Ashley Gilbertson. They offer their version of Bill Miller's death in a recent PBS Frontline interview titled "Once Upon a Time in Fallujah":

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/once-upon-a-time-in-iraq-fallujah/transcript/>

In 2008, Filkins wrote at length about the event in a *New York Times* article titled "My Long War."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/24/magazine/24filkins-t.html>

Ray McPadden, *We March at Midnight*. Blackstone, 2021.

Alexander Saxby, *Fallujah Memoirs: A Grunt's Eye View of the Second Battle of Fallujah*. 2021.

For all Strike Through the Mask! columns and especially this one, thanks to Wrath-Bearing Tree editor Michael Carson for suggestions and inspiration.