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Chuck Larson, *Heroes Among Us: Firsthand Accounts of Combat from America's Most Decorated Warriors in Iraq and Afghanistan*. New York: NAL Caliber, 2008. Pp. xvi, 334. ISBN 978-0-451-22334-0.

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This book collects twenty-nine accounts from decorated veterans of the wars Iraq and Afghanistan.¹ All but two are first-hand, taken from interviews conducted by another decorated veteran, Major Chuck Larson. He has edited the accounts to make them clear to a wide audience. The book is also equipped with an introduction by Gen. Tommy Franks and an afterword by Sen. John McCain.

All of the veterans Larson has selected have been awarded one of the highest military medals—the Medal of Honor, the Silver Star, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Navy Cross, or the Air Force Cross. His professed goal in creating this book is to give a better understanding of the veterans' experiences and their extraordinary acts of bravery, without attempting to sway the reader toward or against either war.

Larson himself served as a Major in the U.S. Army and was the Command Judge Advocate for the 372nd Engineer Group and Task Force 185th Aviation Group during a year-long deployment to Iraq in 2004 (6). As a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a recipient of the Bronze Star himself, he has all the qualifications to write such a book like *Heroes Among Us*. His military experience has enabled him to interview veterans and convey their narratives without losing or distorting information through the complexities of military customs and terminology. He retains all the essential components of the veterans' stories while avoiding excessive military lingo.

The resulting book is accessible to a broad range of readers. Everyone from those with no knowledge of the military, to the most seasoned veterans will be able to peruse the book without continually consulting a *Jane's* for clarifications.

Even veterans of the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan will learn about acts of bravery few have had a chance to witness, but those without personal experience in either war will learn the most.² It can be difficult to determine the veracity of second-hand information at a time when attitudes concerning both wars are polarized and often saturated with political bias.

¹ Twenty-four describe the Iraq war. The dates of events range from March 2003 to March 2005 for Iraq, and November 2001 to March 2002 for Afghanistan.

² As a veteran of Iraq myself, I gained a fuller appreciation of the war from reading this book. My unit's task of convoy security only allowed me a narrow view of the war during a certain period. The diverse accounts from a broader period allowed for a more complete understanding. Additionally, I was not fortunate to witness the type of heroism described in *Heroes Among Us*.

These twenty-seven eyewitness accounts, by those most acquainted with the subject, give readers unadulterated and diverse information about both wars.

In his introduction, however, Larson falters in his attempt to avoid bias. He begins admirably by focusing on the veterans and the significance of the medals they have earned, but then begins to digress, relating his own positive interactions with Iraqi civilians and noting how he feels conditions for Iraqis have improved since the invasion of Iraq and the ousting of Saddam Hussein. He then launches into a discourse about freedom and democracy:

From the day of this nation's birth, we've been the freest nation on the face of the earth. The moment we accepted this gift from God, we gave ourselves the mission of spreading liberty to the four corners of the earth and to the seven seas. Freedom is our number-one export...³ Democracies don't wage war against one another. If you want to be inspired, watch what people do with their newfound freedom. It's the power of an unchained human spirit and it's a sight to behold. Since time immemorial, the forces of good and evil have waged war against one another (6, 9).⁴

His digression, an explicit attempt to justify the wars, is irrelevant to his professed goal and leaves a bad taste in the reader's mouth just as he proceeds into the narratives. If Larson truly wanted to present the experiences of veterans and their heroism in an unbiased manner, he should have omitted this segment.

Only two of the narratives in the book are not first-hand: the accounts of Army Sergeant First Class Paul Smith and Marine Corporal Jason Dunham. Both died from wounds sustained in combat and were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. In these two cases, Larson has supplemented a brief description of their actions with a eulogy from one of their family members.

One helpful feature of this book is that several of the accounts involve the same engagement; this facilitates synoptic views of those particular battles. The best example involves a battle in Afghanistan during Operation Anaconda in March of 2002 (65). A U.S. Special Forces team attempted to secure a mountain called Takur Ghar by landing on its summit from their helicopter. Members of al-Qaeda were already entrenched on the mountain and fired on the helicopter as it approached. One member of the Special Forces team fell from the helicopter. In attempting to rescue him, his fellow team members landed on the mountain and a battle with al-Qaeda forces ensued (69).

The narratives of this battle are by three servicemen sent to aid the besieged Special Forces team. All of were awarded the Silver Star each provides a unique viewpoint, which taken together give a very complete presentation of the battle.

The interrelated accounts begin with Army Sergeant Eric Stebner, a member of a Quick Reaction Force sent to provide assistance on the ground. Stebner and the other soldiers were supposed to have been transported by helicopter to the mountaintop and deployed close to the battle. Instead, their helicopter released them several thousand feet below

³ Larson has made "democracy" synonymous with "freedom" and presented an idealized version of history. E.g., he ignores the presence of slavery in notable democracies such as classical Athens, the Roman Republic, and pre-Civil War America.

⁴ Another fallacy: e.g., the United States and the Confederacy, both democracies (the one slave-owning, the other formerly so) waged war against each other. Nor is the transition to democracy always as picturesque as Larson would have his readers believe. Unless one considers a guillotine inspiring, the French Revolution was hardly an inspiring example of what people do with their newfound freedom.

where they should have been. Realizing the error, Sgt. Stebner led the soldiers of the Quick Reaction Force in a hurried ascent up the mountain. Racing to assist the besieged Special Forces team, they climbed through rough terrain and frigid weather, while taking fire from al-Qaeda forces above them. After climbing for several hours in these conditions, they reached the battle and, despite their fatigue, linked up with the other U.S. forces and immediately closed with the enemy (61-3).

Next, Captain Nathan Self gives his description of the same battle from a different angle on the battlefield. Self belonged to a different Quick Reaction Force also sent by helicopter to aid the Special Forces team on the mountain. Their helicopter made it to the correct landing site, but before the men could safely deploy, the al-Qaeda forces attacked with small arms fire. Some members of the Quick Reaction Force were wounded and the helicopter made a crash landing. Captain Self and the remaining soldiers kept the al-Qaeda forces at bay and called in close air support. When Sgt. Stebner and his soldiers arrived, they joined in the assault on the al-Qaeda forces (70-3).

Finally, the account of Captain Christopher Russell provides a viewpoint from the air. Russell was a Weapons System Operator on one of the F-15s providing close air support for Captain Self and the other soldiers. Since U.S. and al-Qaeda forces were in such close proximity, he could not safely employ his bombs without risk of friendly fire casualties. The F-15 pilots' only other option was to fly close to the mountain and use the guns mounted on their aircraft to engage the enemy. This was a difficult, because the gun was designed for air-to-air combat and not for attacking ground targets. Even though flying so close to the mountain made the planes vulnerable to enemy small arms fire, the pilots chose to employ their guns (81-3). As Russell puts it:

Wow, pure adrenaline. My pilot and I had never deployed the air-to-ground gun before in combat or even in a live fire exercise. But we were prepared to do it. The way we set it up, one aircraft was going to be cleared to employ the gun and the other aircraft was going to remain high; we call it high-and-dry, looking for any surface-to-air threats being shot at the guy that's rolling in. Twister 5-1 was cleared to strike. He rolled in and was going down to shoot. The enemies and the friendlies were so close to each other that SLICK 0-1 couldn't tell if the F-15 guns were pointing at him or the enemy in the trees. That's how close it was. That attack axis wasn't going to work. The guys on the ground called out, "Abort, abort," just as they were rolling down. They came off dry and they did another circling pass. On the second one, they were cleared hot and they strafed the trees, they nailed the trees, and after Twister 5-1 made a safe escape, the call came in: "Good guns, I can smell the pine tree! (82)"

Six other accounts (by two brothers Captain Daniel Hibner and Captain David Hibner, Gunnery Sergeant Justin Lehew, Hospitalman Third Class Luis Fonseca Jr., Lance Corporal Timothy Tardif, and Lance Corporal Joseph Perez) give multiple perspectives on three different engagements. The remaining twenty narratives recount discrete engagements.

All the accounts are coherent and on only one occasion is the reliability of Larson's editing questionable. At the beginning of Lance Corporal Timothy Tardif's account, he details the events of the battle where he earned the Silver Star. Tardif stresses his positive

interaction with Iraqis and makes remarks about freedom suspiciously reminiscent of Larson's introduction:

We became really tight with the people there. They would invite us over for dinner and tea. We treated their kids as if they were our own. One of my buddies that I still e-mail is an Iraqi police officer. We taught the police officers martial arts and other police techniques, like how to restrain someone. We communicated through interpreters. We'd help the Iraqis push their carts, bale hay, whatever they needed. We tried to do whatever we could for them. If we were on patrol and saw somebody who needed help, we just did it. We gave them water and dug ditches for drainage. The Shiites were very appreciative. They loved having their freedom.... The insurgency was easy to smooch because the people there loved us. They would come up to us and tell us where the weapons caches were (223-4).

There are several problems here. First, the action for which Tardif earned the Silver Star took place on 12 April 2003, less than a month after the invasion of Iraq. Tardif is describing an area just South of Baghdad so it is improbable that he had been there for any length of time, but the description makes it seem he had been there for a long period. Already, less than a month into the invasion, Tardif and his unit were battling an established insurgency.

Secondly, in the account of the same engagement, Lance Corporal Joseph Perez describes the Iraqis before the battle rather differently: "We saw Bedouin families who were scared, throwing up their white flags as soon as they saw us. It wasn't until we got to the middle of Iraq that we started to see more and more people" (232). The book only indicates that Joseph Perez belonged to the First Marine Division and it is unclear whether he belonged to the same battalion or regiment as Tardif. However, both were members of the infantry, embarked on amtracs with the First Marine Division during the invasion of Iraq. It may, therefore, be inferred that they would have had somewhat similar experiences dealing with Iraqi civilians before the battle. Hence, one must wonder whether Larson has accurately rendered Tardif's words or taken an opportunity to further his own agenda.

While the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to be controversial topics of oscillating prominence in the media, the heroism of veterans is an aspect that transcends political disputes. Quite apart from one's attitude toward the wars, everyone can appreciate the bravery of the men and women who fight regardless of their personal feelings and without the prior consultation of policy makers.