FIVE LIEUTENANTS: THE HEARTBREAKING STORY OF FIVE HARVARD MEN WHO LED AMERICA TO VICTORY IN WORLD WAR I[1]

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He had done all that the Army had required and expected of him, and more: despite all his self-doubts and fumbling, he had learned to lead men, and those same men had willingly followed him into the trenches and lastly into battle, where their safety, not his own, had been paramount, and where his courage had not faltered. "They can't kill me," he had said, and one gets the sense that by that morning, his men believed it.[2]

I. Introduction

In *Five Lieutenants*, James Nelson explores the private thoughts of five Harvard-educated lieutenants during World War I—from their recruitment, training, and suffering during battle to either their untimely death or disillusionment at the hands of a terrible war machine. Meticulously researched from private letters and journals, an especially impressive achievement given the heavy censorship during the war, the book succeeds at two things: giving insight into a war almost forgotten in the American literary narrative and showing that great leaders are not born from education or privilege, but rather from good mentorship and training. Despite being peculiarly organized and, at times, burdened with cumbersome prose, *Five Lieutenants* is worth reading by any junior officer or fan of military history, because it offers a distinct perspective of the challenges faced by our forefathers and of leadership and leadership development that is still relevant today.

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[1] JAMES CARL NELSON, FIVE LIEUTENANTS: THE HEARTBREAKING STORY OF FIVE HARVARD MEN WHO LED AMERICA TO VICTORY IN WORLD WAR I (2012).

[2] *Id.* at 266.

II. Nelson's Personal Research Made Public

James Carl Nelson, a journalist by trade, has written two books on World War I: *The Remains of Company D*[3] and the follow-on of that story, *Five Lieutenants*. Nelson was inspired to research and write these two books by the exploits and stories of his grandfather, John Nelson, who was a member of the 28th Infantry Regiment during the Great War.[4] He was enthralled at a young age by his grandfather's story of being wounded and left for dead near Soissons, France, in 1918.[5] The story told to a young Nelson was vague in details, described as, "my grandfather had been shot in the left side by a machine gun bullet, laid out on the field overnight, and then was 'saved' by two stretcher-bearers from some exotic French Colonial unit."[6]

After his grandfather's death in 1993, Nelson became interested in researching more about him and received his grandfather's medical records, indicating wounds much more grievous than the childhood stories he was told. Nelson also found a muster roll from his grandfather's unit, Company D, 28th Infantry Regiment, U.S. 1st Division.[7] Nelson's search for the story of his grandfather inevitably led him to explore the stories of his grandfather's unit; resulting in seven years of research into the lives and deaths of the men of Company D and the publication of his first novel, *The Remains of Company D*.[8]

While researching the men of Company D, Nelson observed that the letters from enlisted men were often "terse and devoid of any descriptions of actions, emotions, hopes, and fears and any accounting of where Soldiers had been."[9] Noting that the letters of officers were less censored and more detailed, Nelson began a "concerted push" to find letters and writings of the young officers in the unit.[10] During this push, Nelson discovered a large number of letters and writings from the men who would eventually take center stage in his next book, *Five*

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[3] JAMES CARL NELSON, THE REMAINS OF COMPANY D: THE STORY OF THE GREAT WAR (2009).
[4] JAMES CARL NELSON, *About the Author*, http://theremainsofcompanyd.com/about.html (last visited Sept. 9, 2013).
[5] *Id.*
[6] *Biography*, JAMES CARL NELSON, http://www.amazon.xom/JamesCarlNelson/e/B00294I39A/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_01 (last visited Sept. 9, 2013) [hereinafter *Biography*].
[7] *Id.*
[8] NELSON, *supra* note 4.
[9] NELSON, *supra* note 1, at ix.
[10] *Id.*

Lieutenants, resulting in "a natural bookend" to *The Remains of Company D*.[11] The fact these lieutenants happened to all be Harvard-educated and, more importantly, kept meticulous journals and volumes of letters led to the creation of this book.[12] Nelson, educated at the University of Minnesota,[13] does not appear to have set out to research the exploits of Ivy League graduates in the Great War, but seems instead to have arranged the stories he had already researched. This becomes evident in the disjointed organization of the book and tenuous relationship of the overall narrative to the Harvard education of these five lieutenants.

III. Overcoming Censorship

Nelson intended to uncover what drove these privileged young Harvard men to enlist, how they interacted with those from a lower social class, and if they were superior leaders due to their privileged education and upbringing.[14] He generally succeeds in this endeavor and, truly, his greatest achievement in *Five Lieutenants* is his research. Gathering material for the book was a Herculean task, considering diaries and journals were forbidden during World War I, lest the enemy recover them. Further increasing the difficulty of finding source material was the "Draconian censorship" of the enlisted letters to home and the fact that many enlisted soldiers simply could not write for a variety of reasons: some were recent immigrants, others were barely literate, and many had almost no education.[15] Nelson found exception to these obstacles in the copious writings from the five lieutenants of the book's title: Richard Newhall, George Redwood, George McKinlock, George Haydock, and William O.P. Morgan.[16] In addition to the scarcity of source material, given the relatively little time Americans spent in the Great War, critical writing on the subject is virtually non-existent and personal accounts written after the war tended to be overly patriotic and lacked detailed descriptions of life on the front line.[17] A quick glimpse

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[11] *Biography*, *supra* note 6.
[12] NELSON, *supra* note 1, at ix.
[13] NELSON, *supra* note 4.
[14] *Biography*, *supra* note 6.
[15] NELSON, *supra* note 1, at ix.
[16] *See id*. at ix–xi.
[17] *See* David Lundberg, *The American Literature of War: The Civil War, World War I, and World War II*, AM. Q., vol. 36, no. 3, 1984, at 373, 378.

of the bibliography[18] in *Five Lieutenants* demonstrates that Nelson is a capable and determined researcher, synthesizing numerous personal accounts, newspaper articles, and official records into a compelling, mostly coherent narrative.

While Nelson does a magnificent job of combining the various diaries and letters of his protagonists[19], there is a sense that, in order to focus primarily on Harvard-educated lieutenants, more interesting officers' stories were either bypassed or glossed over. Perhaps the five lieutenants in Nelson's book stand out not due to their actions in the Great War, but only because they were such prolific writers. That we are denied understanding other junior officers, who might be in many ways much more interesting and inspiring, simply because Harvard lieutenants wrote more than their counterparts leaves the reader feeling a bit cheated. It leaves the impression that Nelson made the choice to focus on Ivy League officers simply because it made a nice theme and catchy title.

One notable example of this omission is that of Second Lieutenant Mort Stromberg, easily the most fascinating person in the book. Stromberg grew up in New York but, preferring to be transient, became the travelling companion of an invalid for a number of years, was left destitute when his ward passes, and somehow joined the rebels during the Cuban Revolution in 1895.[20] There he was injured and rescued by two women on a donkey.[21] Shortly after, he changed his name on a whim, enlisted in the U.S. Army, fought in the Philippines, was cited for distinguished action, patrolled the Mexican border in 1917 with the 28th Infantry Regiment.[22] When the Great War started, he was offered a battlefield commission, shipped off to France, helped train Harvard-educated Lieutenant George Haydock, fought in the Great War, and ultimately was killed by sniper fire in July 1918.[23] Even his death is dramatic, as he died with his pipe in one hand and tobacco in the other; foreshadowing his death by telling his men, "When you see me on the

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[18] NELSON, *supra* note 1, at 347.
[19] *See id*. at 33–46.
[20] *Id.* at 116.
[21] *Id.* "Two girls 'whose brothers were in the rebel army found me lying unconscious, and dragged me to their home on sort of a sled drawn by a jackass. I don't know anything about it but what they told me afterwards.'" *Id.*
[22] *Id.* at 117.
[23] NELSON, *supra* note 1, at 117.

battlefield, I will be smoking my pipe just like this."[24] He is relegated to less than two pages in the novel.[25]

While Nelson's ability to research is impeccable, his writing is, sadly, less so. The book is laid out in a jarring manner, often jumping among protagonists, locations, and time with little warning or transition. For example, George Redwood, one of the protagonists, is not introduced until page 130, a third of the way into the book.[26] By the time he is introduced, every other character has had their background discussed at length and were all training in France before the narrative is interrupted. This introduction is both a disservice to the reader and to George Redwood, whose exploits and heroism deserve better.[27] To compound this difficulty, Nelson often uses flowery prose, usually at the beginning of a chapter, which is unnatural and clumsy, as when Nelson describes the German front-lines from Richard Newhall's perspective

> They were so close now they felt as they could reach out and touch them, and through a cold, sputtering rain and heavy mist they squinted intently past the detritus of no-man's-land, past the craters and curling and rustling bands of barbed wire to where the dark forms seemed to lull without a care in the world, hanging wash and cooking their bread and sausages under think plumes of white smoke.[28]

It is unclear whether this was paraphrased writing of one of the lieutenants or if Nelson felt he needed to wax eloquently to make the book better literature. Either way, it is unnecessary. Nelson's writing is best when he communicates in his natural, no-frills journalistic style, as he does for the best parts of the story. The protagonists and material are engaging enough without clumsy prose distracting from what is

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[24] *Id*.
[25] *Id.* at 115–17.
[26] *Id.* at 130.
[27] George Redwood was a scout, mapping machine gun posts and German strong points. He first achieved fame on March 29, 1918 when he led four Americans to capture prisoners of war. *See id.* at 188. On May 29, 1918, he was wounded in the shoulder by machinegun fire but refused to go to the aid station. Later that day, he was again wounded, this time in the jaw. He was ordered to go to the hospital, but refused and left the aid station to return to his men. He was again shot in the chest by machinegun fire, refused any aid, rescued a wounded Soldier, and was killed by artillery while trying to lead a counterattack against the German lines. *See id.* at 270–73.
[28] *Id.* at 53.

otherwise a great book.[29] Despite these shortcomings, Nelson manages to craft an engaging narrative while illuminating common threads of the war experience, creating a work that is informative for junior leaders in today's military.

IV. From the "Great War" to the "Long War"

Nelson's work brings forth an interesting comparison between the doughboys[30] of World War I and junior officers fighting the Long War.[31] The frustrations of lieutenants of the 28th Infantry Regiment in 1918 would be familiar to any junior officer serving in the early stages of Iraq circa 2004;[32] supplies were inadequate and the training was driven by higher commanders, mostly out-of-touch officers who were fighting the previous war. As Shipley Thomas, a junior officer with the 26th Infantry Regiment, lamented about "the incompetence of generals who taught open warfare and attack, 'when any fool could see that it was the Germans, and not us, who were going to attack.'"[33] Richard Newhall describes the frustrations of conducting unnecessary drill and ceremony in a combat zone when he lambasts a marching review for a general officer; requiring an earlier-than usual wake up for his troops, a long march, and standing in a field for an hour only to have the ceremony last no longer than ten minutes.[34] Newhall would likely speak for any lieutenant who has been forced to attend a formal ceremony in Iraq or Afghanistan, describing the ordeal as "of one those stupid, unnecessary, very military things."[35]

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[29] The narrative suffers also from a lack of editing, as the book contains grammatical and editing errors, occasionally leaving out quotation marks, to cite one example. With a better editor to keep Nelson from wandering into an unnatural writing style, this book could have been much more digestible and enjoyable.

[30] Slang term for an American Soldier in WWI, although its origins are unknown. *The Origins of Doughboy*, http://www.worldwar1.com/dbc/origindb.htm (last visited Sept. 9, 2013).

[31] A term for the Global War on Terrorism, as coined by General John P. Abizaid in 2004, see Bradley Graham & Josh White, *Abizaid Credited With Popularizing the Term 'Long War,'* WASH. POST, Feb. 3, 2006.

[32] This reviewer deployed to Baqubah, Iraq, in February 2004 until November 2005 as a Platoon Leader for C Battery, 1st Battalion, 6th Field Artillery Regiment, 1st Infantry Division. The transition from a field artillery battery to a maneuver combat company was filled with the same frustrations.

[33] NELSON, *supra* note 1, at 86.

[34] *See id.* at 166.

[35] *Id.*

Nelson's research provides numerous examples of the experiences and frustrations suffered by the doughboys that are still relevant today, be they: the disparity of living conditions for front line combat troops versus the support troops,[36] a Christmas meal sent from the United States and served in a warzone,[37] losing track of days and weeks, as each is the same,[38] the sheer amount of gear that a soldier was expected to carry into combat,[39] and even paying out claims to locals with destroyed property.[40] Nelson's portrayal of the challenges and frustrations facing junior officers in World War I is important, because they keep a reader engaged and make the book relevant to not just war historians, but to officers in today's Army. A junior officer can gain personal insight from the lessons learned by George Haydock and Richard Newhall, who were in their shoes almost a century ago.

Ultimately, Nelson answers his question of whether these five lieutenants were better leaders simply because they attended Harvard—they were not. The timeless truth that Nelson uncovers, using the exploits of primarily Haydock and Newhall,[41] is that great leaders are made, not born. Privilege and education alone do not make a leader.

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[36] *Id.* at 211. Haydock describes eating at a hotel after coming off two weeks in the trenches. He enters the hotel, "looking like a tramp . . . covered in mud of a month's collection, no belt, and in need of a haircut." *Id.* Upon entering the hotel, he encounters "two staff 2nd lieutenants all shined up within an inch of their lives." *Id.* "They thought we had the plague (as a matter of fact we were only unclean) in a way that made me smile. It is a funny war." *Id.*

[37] *Id.* at 126. Haydock describes eating turkey dinner and the lieutenants giving each other stockings full of cigarettes, chewing gum, and an orange.

[38] *Id.* at 205. "Like many other doughboys in France that spring, Morgan often lost track of the time, his duties, the sameness of the days, and the changing French weather conspiring to leave him unsure if it was Monday or Sunday." *Id.* at 205.

[39] *Id.* at 123. George Haydock describes his kit in great detail. "Starting at the bottom I wear the heaviest underclothes I own, flannel shirt sweater, and uniform, either my big boots or heavy shoes and spiral putties. Over this I wear my sheepskin coat, carry a pack with two days rations, blanket poncho, shelter tent, and an extra pair of shoes and mess kit. On my belt I wear a canteen, first aid packet, automatic and two extra clips, a Veri pistol, which is a modified form of a shotgun to fire rockets with, around my neck I wear an English small box respirator which is a gas mask to take air in and is about a foot square. On the other side I wear a French gas mask . . . dispatch case, and am supposed to have field glasses to crown the whole business." This is in addition to his helmet, which he describes as a "tin hat." *Id.*

[40] *Id.* at 168. Newhall describes sending Soldiers to guard rabbits during a fire drill to "protect the Government from exorbitant claims for lost property." *Id.*

[41] *See generally id.* at 232–38. While the other Harvard lieutenants make appearances through the book, the focus is certainly on Haydock and Newhall. Most of the second half of the book in the story focuses on their friendship and growth as leaders.

Using the private thoughts and exploits of Haydock and Newhall, Nelson demonstrates that mentorship, humility, and introspection are more determinative of a person's leadership ability than education and upbringing.[42] One example of a positive mentor Lieutenant Colonel Jesse Cullison, who taught Newhall effective communication under stress by "know[ing] exactly what he wants and [being able to] tell his subordinates what he expects of them briefly and clearly, without scolding, lecturing, or threatening them."[43]

As an important counter-point, a lieutenant can learn just as much by watching a poor leader.[44] Nelson shows that great leaders are humble and rely on the knowledge of others. Haydock, originally timid and unsure, learned to rely on his noncommissioned officers, writing, "If they will help me, all will be well."[45] He eventually becomes assertive and confident, winning the respect of his men. Through Haydock, Nelson illustrates that with mentorship and training, a lieutenant can find the balance between having a sense of humor and strictly enforcing standards.[46] Most importantly, Nelson shows a great leader places the needs of his men before his own. This is exemplified again in Haydock, who died running up and down the line telling his men to "keep lower for your own sakes."[47] Ultimately, it was not Harvard that made Haydock and Newhall great; it was their humility, their desire to learn, and their mentors.

V. Conclusion

> *'Waal,* now,' said an old soldier once to a young lieutenant, *'soldiers is queer bein's* [sic]. *Yer have to get so yer understand 'em'*[sic]. *Getting so you understand em' may, of course, come to an officer by the gift of God, without the necessity of having to live with soldiers; but generally it does not.*[48]

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[42] *Id.*
[43] *Id.* at 232.
[44] *Id.* at 213, 232 (describing how Newhall observed traits he despised in his Company Commander, Captain Francis Van Natter).
[45] *Id*. at 115.
[46] *See. id.* at 229–30.
[47] *Id.* at 266.
[48] *Id.* at 229. This quotation is from Robert Bullard, the 1st Division's Commander. Haydock, "who struggled to understand' em [sic] the previous winter, had come to know

Despite the jarring organization and occasional clumsy prose, Nelson crafted a book that is worthy of the time and effort to read it. Given the sheer magnitude of the effort required to synthesize the various stories of these five Harvard men, Nelson's less-than-perfect writing can be forgiven. The stories of these five lieutenants, and those of the supporting characters, from the 28th Infantry Regiment during World War I are timeless; their experiences and suffering are relatable to those serving in the military today. Every leader should read about the exploits of our forefathers in World War I with a critical eye toward the lessons they learned, paid for in blood on the battlefield.

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the men in his platoon individually and earned their respect . . . ." *Id.* Through the course of the second half of the novel, Nelson uses the diaries of Haydock and Newhall to show the progression of these young lieutenants from clumsy and clueless lieutenants to competent leaders, as fine as any that America has ever produced.