

**THE UNFORGIVING MINUTE: A SOLDIER'S EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR LAKEYSIA R. HARVIN

*My part of the contract, the responsibility that came with the privilege of leadership, was to never spend their lives cheaply. I carried the weight of the responsibility on every patrol, yet unlike a rucksack or a Kevlar helmet I could never slip it off when we came back inside the wire. It was there when I woke up at midnight to check how they were faring in their lonely guard towers. It was there when I walked through their tent that night and when I returned to my cot for a night of restless sleep, turning every hour on a narrow cot. This was the price of a salute.<sup>2</sup>*

The above quote from the *Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education* by Craig Mullaney insightfully describes the weight an effective military leader bears when he or she decides to take an oath to lead soldiers.<sup>3</sup> It drives home the message that a salute is more than just a gesture that a soldier gives to a military leader, but a salute is earned through hard work, sound judgment, and a genuine concern for soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Unforgiving Minute*, Mullaney gives a remarkable chronological account of how his background, education, and military training shaped him into a military leader. The author takes the reader on a journey through the valuable lessons he learned in preparing to lead soldiers. His leadership abilities and training would ultimately be put to the test in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> While assigned as a platoon leader in Afghanistan, Mullaney is faced with a serious tactical decision during a

---

\* Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Currently assigned as Deputy Staff Judge Advocate, Office of the Staff Judge Advocate, Headquarters, U.S. Army South (ARSOUTH), Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

<sup>1</sup> CRAIG M. MULLANEY, *THE UNFORGIVING MINUTE: A SOLDIER'S EDUCATION* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 268.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 285.

fire fight.<sup>6</sup> This fire fight ends in the death of one of his soldiers.<sup>7</sup> He calls this experience the “unforgiving minute.”<sup>8</sup>

Mullaney’s intent in writing this book is to provide insight into military life with the hope to either encourage someone to serve in the military or to create an appreciation for military service.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the book, Mullaney describes his experiences with such vivid imagery and intricate detail, the reader feels as though he or she is standing right beside him. Although the focus of the book leads up to the unforgiving minute, this book provides many military leadership lessons and touches on legal concepts which are relevant to judge advocates. It also gives an honest look at the conflicts military leaders grapple with both externally and internally.

Throughout the book, Mullaney seeks to answer whether the combination of his education, experience, and military training will be enough at the time it matters the most—when his soldiers’ lives are on the line.<sup>10</sup> In developing his book, Mullaney divides the writing into three sections—Student, soldier, and Veteran.<sup>11</sup> These sections could also be described in military terms, with which soldiers are intimately familiar, such as the training phase, execution phase, and the After Action Review (AAR). In the first section, Mullaney describes his indoctrination into military life as a student while attending West Point and Ranger School.<sup>12</sup> In the second section of the book, Mullaney applies the knowledge and training he has learned from West Point, the University of Oxford (“Oxford”), and Ranger School in a deployed environment. Finally, in the third section, he reflects on his military experiences and endeavors to teach others.

Although other authors have written about the West Point experience, few capture it as well as Mullaney.<sup>13</sup> Mullaney begins the book describing his first day at West Point. Immediately, he questions whether he made the right decision in choosing West Point.<sup>14</sup> During this first

---

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

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 285–91.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at inside flap.

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

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

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 3–213.

<sup>13</sup> See DAVID LIPSKY, *ABSOLUTELY AMERICAN: FOUR YEARS AT WEST POINT* (2003).

<sup>14</sup> MULLANEY, *supra* note 1, at 217–341.

section, the reader also learns more about the author's background and his motivations for attending West Point. Mullaney did not come from a military family, but grew up in a "working-class family."<sup>15</sup> His decision to attend West Point was not only based on his own desire for self-improvement but also on his desire to obtain his father's approval.<sup>16</sup> He initially describes his relationship with his father with admiration and credits his father with instilling in him the principles of hard work and responsibility.<sup>17</sup>

These principles would be necessary for him to survive West Point, Airborne School, Oxford, and Ranger School. Each day at West Point, the cadets are taught a new skill or lesson in the race to quickly convert them from civilian life to military life. Many of the cadets' lessons are learned through trial and error which the author describes so clearly, the reader will undoubtedly find them comical.<sup>18</sup> He also learns critical skills such as the importance of staying focused under pressure, paying attention to details, and being prepared for any contingency.<sup>19</sup> Further, Mullaney and the other cadets are taught the importance of teamwork. To survive West Point, the cadets must work together and depend on one another to be successful.<sup>20</sup> Unbeknownst to Mullaney at the time, teamwork and the ability to become cohesive with members of different backgrounds prove to be a very valuable skill in combat.

As he progresses through his years at West Point, he transforms from an underclassman who was a follower to an upperclassman responsible for leading others. Not surprisingly, his view of leadership begins to shift when he becomes a squad leader.<sup>21</sup> As an underclassman, he was not able to fully comprehend the reasons his squad leaders had such strict rules until he was placed into a leadership position.<sup>22</sup> When he became a leader, he realized these standards were necessary for success of the mission.

---

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 16–18.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 13–17. His relationship with his father would later change when he father abandons the family and seeks a divorce. *See id.* at 209–13.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 4–13.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 57–60.

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

After West Point and Airborne School, Mullaney attends Ranger School. Ranger School trains students to “[e]xhaustion, pushing them to the limits of their minds and bodies.”<sup>23</sup> In his book, Mullaney describes the rigorous training required to obtain his Ranger tab. The training seems almost unorthodox, given the lack of sleep and food, in addition to the poor accommodations; however, it is just the opposite. The training is designed to teach soldiers to survive in the most austere conditions. In the end, the training develops Mullaney’s self confidence to deal with complex situations. Mullaney also learns that the failure to be alert and at his best could cost his or his soldier’s life.<sup>24</sup>

The author uses a great quotation in his book that captures what Ranger School attempts to accomplish. Quoting the book by S.L.A. Marshall “Men Against Fire,” Mullaney states, “The far object of a training system is to prepare the combat officer mentally so that he can cope with the unusual and unexpected as if it were the altogether normal and give him poise in a situation where all else is in disequilibrium.”<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, Ranger School prepares him for combat.

Ranger School does not come without hardships. Mullaney experiences failure during an exercise and is recycled in that phase of training.<sup>26</sup> From that experience he learned how to persevere and recover from failure, even when he wants to quit both physically and mentally.<sup>27</sup> The following words from his ranger instructor make a lifelong indelible impression on him and will later serve to motivate him while deployed:

You are here for the troops you are going to lead. You are responsible for keeping them alive and accomplishing whatever mission you’re given. I don’t care if you’re tired, hurt, or lonely. This is for them. And they deserve better. You owe them your Ranger tab. . . . [T]his isn’t about you.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Soldier’s Life, Ranger School, [http://goarmy.com/life/ranger\\_school.jsp](http://goarmy.com/life/ranger_school.jsp) (last visited Sept. 8, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> MULLANEY, *supra* note 1, at 42.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 33 (quoting S.L.A. MARSHALL, MEN AGAINST FIRE: THE PROBLEM OF BATTLE COMMAND 116 (2000)).

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 109–11.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 102.

Similar to Mullaney's experience at Ranger School, judge advocates must also persevere through adversity. If a judge advocate has ever stayed up late or missed events because of preparing for trial, writing a motion, or answering a legal issue for a commander, then that judge advocate has tapped into that same dogged determination described in this book. As judge advocates, we owe it to our client, whether it is the Government or a soldier, to be the best advocate that we can. We have to persevere and perform our jobs well, not just for our own personal accomplishment, but for the stage that we set for the judge advocates who come after us.

The judge advocate's ability to be accurate becomes even more important in a combat environment, where soldiers' lives are on the line. We should always seek to gain the confidence of our commanders regarding legal issues because it will allow commanders to focus on their many other tasks. Providing accurate and timely advice is not optional for judge advocates, but something judge advocates owe to the clients they serve. Consequently, perseverance is one of the many leadership lessons that judge advocates can learn from Mullaney's book.

Following West Point and Ranger School, Mullaney is selected to attend the University of Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar.<sup>29</sup> During this part of the book, the author devotes several chapters, repetitively, discussing his various adventures while attending Oxford. Although his experiences at Oxford fit chronologically, these pages are a very slow read and contributes very little to showing how this experience relates significantly to his military growth or success. Instead, this section could be much more concise. The reader only learns that Oxford gives Mullaney more independence and the ability to think more in-depth.<sup>30</sup> The author describes this experience by stating, "Where the military academy had taught me how to answer questions, Oxford taught me what to ask."<sup>31</sup> The remaining chapters develop his relationship with a woman, who later becomes his wife.<sup>32</sup> Overall, the author devotes too much time to his Oxford experience, which ultimately distracts the reader from his underlying message of how his military experiences shaped him as a leader.

---

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 75–79.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 136.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 150–86.

The author's graduation from Oxford and reentry into regular military life is a welcomed event for the reader because it picks up the pace of the book. Following Oxford and the basic course, he moves to Fort Drum to begin preparations for his deployment to Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> As a platoon leader, he is also forced to become a problem-solver as he experiences many of the issues that commanders deal with every day, such as assisting soldiers with financial, family, and legal issues.<sup>34</sup> Fortunately, he is assigned an experienced platoon sergeant to assist him in leading the platoon. Mullaney is smart enough to know that his success as a platoon leader is greatly depends on the skill of his platoon sergeant.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, Mullaney listens to his platoon sergeant and learns skills which cannot be adequately taught in a classroom, but are derived from years of experience.<sup>36</sup>

The second section of the book discusses the author's deployment and showcases the execution of his military training. This section is the highlight of the book and definitely a page-turner. The chapters within this section cover many legal concepts of interest to a judge advocate such as the rules of engagement, the law of war, humanitarian aid, and international relations.<sup>37</sup> Beyond the legal issues, the book introduces the reader to the human side of war and the myriad of emotions soldiers experience while deployed in a combat zone. Mullaney openly discusses his fears and self-doubt.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, he skillfully sets the scene to lead to the unforgiving minute.

Mullaney is faced with the question, "What do we do now, Sir?"<sup>39</sup> by his soldier during the fire fight in Afghanistan. At that moment, Mullaney's crew has just killed three Taliban men and is being ambushed.<sup>40</sup> As a platoon leader, Mullaney has to decide whether to instruct his men to follow the commander toward the ambush or to stand still and return machine gun fire from Lozano Ridge.<sup>41</sup> He chooses to stand his ground. As a junior officer, Mullaney does not have many real-life military experiences to draw upon in this situation. He also does not

---

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 190–204.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 198–99.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 193.

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

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 238–39, 299–300, 249–56, 325.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 267.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 285.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 284–85.

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

have a lot of time to make a decision. Accordingly, he must trust his training.

Commanders often ask this same question of judge advocates when seeking legal advice. Judge advocates may be in positions where they are junior officers advising a senior commander on a time-sensitive matter in which they have little experience. Similar to Mullaney, judge advocates must also trust in their training and legal abilities. It is impossible for any military school or training to address every scenario regarding what judge advocates will face in the field, but judge advocates must draw upon their education, experience, and training to provide sound legal advice.

After the fire-fight, the author should be given credit for not ending the story abruptly after the purpose of the book is achieved. Mullaney completes the story and goes a step further to expose the emotions both he and his soldiers experience after the death of a fellow soldier: guilt, pity, and loss.<sup>42</sup> Mullaney also describes the overwhelming guilt he feels as a leader for the loss of his soldier.<sup>43</sup> He expertly brings war into perspective when he conveys the message that war does not stop after a loss.<sup>44</sup> Mullaney concludes that soldiers have to still continue with the mission, without really having significant time to grieve or heal.<sup>45</sup>

In the final section and chapters of this book, the author primarily reflects on his experiences in Afghanistan. He discusses his return from Afghanistan, the effects of deployment, and the end of his military career. He appropriately titles the first chapter in this section “Dislocated” because he has to readjust from a combat to a normal life.<sup>46</sup> He also touches on the post-traumatic stress disorder he experiences by describing how various daily events trigger his memories of Afghanistan. His memories of the events which occurred in Afghanistan also carry over into his classroom. In his last military assignment, he serves as a professor at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.<sup>47</sup> At first he refuses to discuss his time in Afghanistan with his students, but this later changes.<sup>48</sup> He realizes that he has an obligation to share his experiences,

---

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 292–97.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 292, 295.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 298.

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

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 345.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 359.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 361–63.

to include his mistakes, with his students because that experience may save their lives one day.<sup>49</sup>

Mullaney will probably replay the unforgiving minute many times in his head and always be left with the question of whether he made the right decision. Unfortunately, this is a recurring thought that far too many commanders have to face when a soldier is lost. Mullaney realizes that he cannot change the outcome, but he can give back by sharing his experiences with others. The greatest victory really emerges at the end of the book, when Mullaney goes to the grave of the soldier who died on his watch and forgives himself.<sup>50</sup>

This book warrants two rave reviews and is a highly recommended read. It seamlessly weaves together the author's life, while providing and expounding upon solid military leadership principles. This book has received favorable reviews from both the military and civilian communities. In Colonel (Retired) Kingseed's review of this book, he states that it "[S]hould be mandatory reading for every junior officer that dons the uniform."<sup>51</sup> The New York Times describes this book as "[O]ne man's story, warmly, and credibly told."<sup>52</sup> Overall, Mullaney succeeds in his objective to explain military life and inspire others to serve.<sup>53</sup>

The lessons Mullaney dwells on are timeless and universal, for all leaders in any walk of life, whether or not they must experience that dreaded unforgiving minute. Mullaney expertly advises the reader how to forgive and how to parlay the experience into teaching others.

---

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 361–62.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* at 367–68.

<sup>51</sup> Cole C. Kingseed, Book Review, *An Officer's Coming of Age*, ARMY MAG., Mar. 2009, available at <http://www.USA.org/publications/armymagazine/armyarchive/may2009/Pages/AnOfficer%E2%80%99sComingofAge.aspx>.

<sup>52</sup> Janet Maslin, Book Review, *The Battlefield Can Be an Unforgiving Teacher*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 25, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/26/books/26masl.html>.

<sup>53</sup> MULLANEY, *supra* note 1, at author's note.



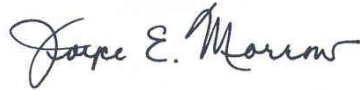




By Order of the Secretary of the Army:

GEORGE W. CASEY, JR.  
*General, United States Army*  
*Chief of Staff*

Official:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joyce E. Morrow".

JOYCE E. MORROW  
*Administrative Assistant to the*  
*Secretary of the Army*  
1127917