

The Good Soldiers¹

Reviewed by Major Thomas L. Clark*

*[I]f we all said, 'This is our focus, this is our priority, and we're going to win it, we're going to do everything that we have to do to win it,' then we'd win it. This nation can do anything that it wants to do. The question is, does America have the will?*²

I. Introduction

In *The Good Soldiers*, David Finkel³ follows a battalion of 800 Soldiers through their fifteen-month deployment at Rustamiyah, one of the most violent forward operating bases in Iraq.⁴ Nicknamed “The Rangers,” the 2-16th (2d Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment of the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division) deployed in early 2007 as part of the surge to quell sectarian violence in and around Baghdad.⁵ Finkel spent eight months embedded with the 2-16th, observing the war through their eyes, hoping to “document their corner of the war, without agenda.”⁶

II. Background

On 10 January 2007, President Bush declared that previous “efforts to secure Baghdad” had failed because “[t]here were not enough Iraqi and American troops to secure neighborhoods that had been cleared of terrorists and insurgents. And there were too many restrictions on the troops we did have.”⁷ As an effort to fill this void, he announced the commitment of an addition of twenty thousand more troops.⁸ These Soldiers would deploy, primarily in and around Baghdad, to address the increased

sectarian violence.⁹ Their mission was “well-defined,” as announced to the nation: “to help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs.”¹⁰ This new strategy was designed to put the burden back on the Iraqis: we were finally shifting responsibility over to them. Much of the strategy on the ground would follow the guidance of the newly published Army field manual on counterinsurgency, “[w]in the people, win the war.”¹¹

III. Analysis

In the beginning, the 2-16th Soldiers are portrayed as overly optimistic and arguably naïve, from the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Kauzlarich,¹² on down.¹³ The average age in the battalion was nineteen: for most of them, this was their first deployment and their first time away from the United States.¹⁴ After only a few days on the ground, LTC Kauzlarich ordered “a day long walk through the sixteen-square mile area of operations.”¹⁵ “They were finding stockpiles of weapons before the weapon could be used against them. They were getting shot at but not hit. Training and standards. . . . that was the difference.”¹⁶ Two months into the deployment passed before 2-16th experienced their first casualty, but this still did not seem to affect their confidence right away. It was bound to happen. Soon enough, however, the casualties mounted up and confidence began to deteriorate. This was not the case for the political rhetoric back in Washington.

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¹ DAVID FINKEL, *THE GOOD SOLDIERS* (2009).

² *Id.* at 5.

³ David Finkel is the National Enterprise Editor of the *Washington Post*. He was awarded the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting for his series of stories about U.S.-funded democracy efforts in Yemen. *Id.* inside front cover. In May 2010, Mr. Finkel received the 2010 J. Anthony Lukas Book Prize for *The Good Soldiers*. Interview by Andrea Pitzer with David Finkel [hereinafter Pitzer Interview], available at <http://niemanstoryboard.us/2010/05/03/david-finkel-on-the-good-soldiers-the-obligation-is-to-the-story>.

⁴ *Id.* after app. (A Note on Sources and Methods).

⁵ *Id.* at 10.

⁶ *Id.* after app. (A Note on Sources and Methods).

⁷ President George W. Bush, President’s Address to the Nation (Jan. 10, 2007), available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html>. [hereinafter, President Bush’s Address].

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 10 (quoting President Bush’s Address, *supra* note 7).

¹¹ *Id.* at 29. Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, was released just prior to the surge after receiving its first update in twenty years. U.S. DEPT’ OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY (15 Dec. 2006).

¹² FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 8. Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Kauzlarich investigated the Pat Tillman friendly fire death in Afghanistan and made statements to the media that generated negative national attention.

¹³ *Id.* at 19.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 12.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 18.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 19.

To emphasize this disconnect, Finkel introduces each paragraph with a quote from President Bush, most showing stark inconsistency between the Soldiers' experience on the ground and Washington's interpretation of progress.¹⁷ For example, President Bush announced "We're kicking ass," on the same day the 2-16th lost two more members.¹⁸ Finkel does not challenge the statement as false. "To President Bush, that was his version of the war that day."¹⁹ To the Soldier on the ground, it was an entirely different war. In this context, President Bush should be regarded as an equally important character to the story as the Soldiers. It was his war. This conflict also reflects the different roles of the infantry Soldier and policy maker. To the Soldier, war is intimate, horrific and personal, and the measure of success is survival. Neither was necessarily right or wrong, just different perspectives based on their piece of the fight.

Notwithstanding Finkel's stated lack of agenda, his novel engages the ultimate question of the Iraq war: is it worth it? He left the question conspicuously unanswered. "To politicians, generals and commentators, the war was about things more strategic, more political, more policy-driven. To the Soldiers of the 2-16th, war would always be about specific acts of bravery and tragedy."²⁰

Despite his immersion in operations for eight months, Finkel is noticeably absent from the story.²¹ Instead of a first person narrative, he writes in third person making the Soldiers stand out as the main characters.²² The story is not about his experiences; it rightly belongs to the Soldiers. During an interview, Finkel casually shrugged this point off as merely his writing style.²³ Regardless of the explanation, his method provides a unique and chilling perspective on the Iraq War. He takes us much closer to what these Soldiers went through each moment.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 117. Compare "I'm optimistic. We'll succeed unless we lose our nerve. —George W. Bush, July 19, 2007," with "It scared the shit out of everyone. And this . . . has scared everyone, too. Me, everytime I go out on patrol, I feel sick. It's like, I'm gonna get hit, I'm gonna get hit, I'm gonna get hit. . . ."

¹⁸ *Id.* at 162–63.

¹⁹ David Finkel, Speaking at the Perth Writer's Festival (Feb. 27, 2010), available at http://fora.tv/2010/02/27/David_Finkel_The_Good_Soldiers. Finkel explains in another interview "those were directly relevant statements by a main character in the story—it was his war." Pitzer Interview, *supra* note 3.

²⁰ Michiko Kakutani, *Ground War: The Iraq Surge Grunts Knew*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 5, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/06/books/06kakutani.html> (reviewing *The Good Soldiers*).

²¹ Dough Stanton, *Their Corner of the War*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 8, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/11/books/review/Stanton-t.html> (reviewing *The Good Soldiers*).

²² Pitzer Interview, *supra* note 3.

²³ *Id.*

Finkel describes the physical injuries and casualties suffered by Soldiers and Iraqis in almost gruesome detail:

Now they watched helplessly as the driver, nineteen-year-old James Harrelson, burned to death in front of their eyes. Now they were in the tall, green grass on the side of the berm, tending to the snapped bones and hemorrhaging wounds of the four Soldiers they had been able to get to.²⁴

At the same time, he successfully strikes a balance to avoid what he labeled in a recent interview as "war porn."²⁵ In similar regard, he skillfully captures the anguish of surviving comrades and how each casualty steadily shifted their naïve optimism to a realization that "the bullet had already been fired, it was only a matter of time."²⁶ It became apparent that their training wouldn't make a difference to the insurgent at the other end of the wire attached to their bomb. Everything became a matter of chance, almost like a lottery, but with worse odds.

The Good Soldiers gives a voice to those who have served in the most hostile territory in Iraq. Many returned suffering physical and mental injuries that will last a lifetime. During an interview, Finkel commented that a typical e-mail he receives from Soldiers states, "I was over there, I came home. Everyone wanted to know what it was like. I can't talk about it, and I don't talk about it. Now I give people your book and say, 'Read the book, and you'll understand what it was like and why I can't talk about it.'"²⁷

Finkel focuses almost entirely on the horrors and tragedy of war, leaving the reader emotionally drained in the end. Aside from a short interlude into a Soldier of the Month board preparation, little is depicted about the Soldiers' interaction in their down time. Their corner of the war cannot be fully understood without a glimpse into their lives between the bombs and after patrols.

IV. Relevance

The Good Soldiers is pertinent to all judge advocates (JAs). As an advisor, the JA must understand and appreciate the perspective of those who seek our insight. It serves as a reminder that traditional roles of our organizations are not fixed and leaders must adjust for these changes. The 2-16th was an infantry battalion, whose "purpose is to close with

²⁴ FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 124.

²⁵ Pitzer Interview, *supra* note 3.

²⁶ FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 101.

²⁷ Pitzer Interview, *supra* note 3.

and destroy the enemy.”²⁸ The surge was an entirely different mission, with a newly written playbook, untested strategy and different rules. Assigned JAs must often provide advice to leaders when the lines are not entirely clear.

This story also reminds us that sometimes, despite the regulations, leaders will do what they think is right. For example, when the daughter of the commander’s interpreter, Izzy, was injured from an explosion, Major (MAJ) Brent Cummings, the 2-16th’s executive officer acting in his commander’s absence, ignored her non-eligible status and allowed treatment on the base by military physicians.²⁹ It was clearly against regulations, but MAJ Cummings just wanted to help Izzy “who had come to represent all the reasons [LTC] Kauzlarich continued to find faith in the goodness of Iraqis.”³⁰ Attorneys can advise, maybe find a workable solution, but in the end it is the commander’s decision.

Military leaders at all levels must be aware that they are not immune to the same forces that compel mental help for their Soldiers. In fact, they may be more susceptible because of their responsibility. Lieutenant Colonel Kauzlarich

refused Combat Stress³¹ after witnessing his Soldiers remains “scattered along the road.”³² “He made it clear that he needed no help whatsoever. I don’t need that bullshit.”³³ Combat Stress ultimately saw him at his office. As the battalion commander, he likely (and maybe correctly) believed it would not be appropriate to be seen by his troops at Combat Stress.

V. Conclusion

Finkel began his effort with no agenda, but ended with a powerful story that connects on many levels. *The Good Soldiers* is an exceptional book that effectively and accurately captures the truth of war from the Soldiers’ perspective. All could benefit from a deeper understanding of what Soldiers are asked to do, the horror they experience and the scars that are often left behind.

²⁸ FINKEL, *supra* note 1, at 29.

²⁹ *See id.* at 168–73.

³⁰ *Id.* at 168.

³¹ Combat Stress Control Team. *See Combat Stress Control*, ARMY MEDICINE, <http://www.armymedicine.army.mil/about/tl/factscombatstresscontrol.html> (last visited Nov. 27, 2012).

³² *Id.* at 207.

³³ *Id.*