

**Q and A with Craig M. Mullaney, author of *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education***

**What made you decide to write a memoir?**

I began writing as an attempt to hold on to memories I felt slipping away from me. I hoped that by putting those experiences on paper, particularly the more painful memories from Afghanistan, I could finish the war I had brought back home with me. It wasn't until early 2006, when a friend approached me with the idea, that I considered publishing what I had written. I was ambivalent about whether my story would be of any interest to others, but I changed my mind when I recognized that the book might be helpful to those who read it. If I could tell the story well, it might help Americans better understand their military, might inspire some to serve and most to appreciate, and might shed some light on operations in Afghanistan that seem to have been largely forgotten by the American public. I could either continue complaining that people lacked understanding about military service or I could do something to bridge that gap. Finally, as I watched my brother and my students inch closer to graduation and inevitable combat deployments, I felt compelled to pass on what I had learned. It is said that a fool learns from his own mistakes and a wise man from others'. I hope my mistakes make future leaders, in the military and elsewhere, a little bit wiser.

**The book opens on the first day of training at West Point. When did you first start thinking about attending West Point?**

I had a deep respect for the military growing up and listening to my grandfather's stories of his service in the Pacific during World War II. He'd been an enlisted man in the Army Air Corps. Still, as I grew older I never really thought seriously about joining the military. The summer before my senior year of high school I joined a friend of mine for a summer road trip. He was a military brat and had a half-dozen West Pointers in his family tree. During the trip, we spent a couple of days at West Point with one of his father's Academy classmates. As it turns out, Colonel Jones was the Director of Admissions. Over dinner I got the full frontal assault, a bullet-point delivery of what West Point offered. In the end though, it wasn't the sterling academic reputation or the strong wrestling team that drew me in. Walking past statues of Patton and Eisenhower, I was swept up by the call to "Duty, Honor, Country." The sense of purpose and sacrifice was impossible to miss in the determined faces of the cadets marching by in their uniforms. I knew on that first visit, deep down, that West Point was where I belonged. I made the final decision in the spring, and I never looked back.

**What do you feel was the most valuable lesson you learned at the Academy?**

Teamwork. Before I came to West Point, I thought I could accomplish all of my goals through sheer grit and determination. As a high school student and wrestler, that was largely true. Plebe year forever disabused me of that notion. I discovered my own limitations and realized how much more I could accomplish working with others and how much I had to learn from my peers.

**You had a unique experience being at two very different institutions, West Point and Oxford. What surprised you most about life in the military? About Oxford?**

I had a drill sergeant version of leadership in my head. Before I went to West Point, I thought leading others was a matter of issuing commands and orders. I learned quickly in my first leadership role that the key wasn't the volume of my voice or the rank on my sleeve, but rather the more difficult challenge of earning my squad's trust. You do that by being competent, open-minded, and compassionate. The goal is to get them to the point where they *want* to follow you, regardless of your legal authority.

Oxford completely ambushed me. I was totally lost at first without a schedule of classes or a clear set of objectives. In essence, I was given a library card and told to make the most of two years. It forced me to take command of my own education for the first time in my life and I learned to operate independently in a vacuum of orders. That was a great lesson to learn before arriving in Afghanistan.

**What about being a soldier made you a better scholar, and vice-versa?**

Soldiering teaches you organization and discipline, two indispensable assets for a scholar. Being a scholar teaches you to continually reassess your assumptions and logic. As a combat leader, that instinct helped me adapt our training and tactics to a continually shifting operating environment.

**Much of *The Unforgiving Minute* is set in Afghanistan where you served in 2003 and 2004 as a rifle platoon leader along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. What do most Americans not understand about Afghanistan, where you served, that being there and leading a platoon gave you?**

Watching mostly urban battle in Iraq on network television, many Americans may have the same mental picture of fighting in Afghanistan. In fact, Afghanistan is a very different operating environment. It's a rural country far less developed than even Iraq. Four out of five Afghans make their living farming, yet the infrastructure of roads, irrigation networks, and storage facilities has been devastated by a generation of war. Fewer than half of adults can read. That's a key statistic to understand when we are trying to build a functional civil service or training Afghan security forces. Whereas Iraqis bemoan regular electric outages, I patrolled in villages that had never even seen a light bulb. Understanding the complexity of the challenge, which is as much socio-economic and political as military, is essential to finding the right strategy. Having operated in that environment helps me apply a reality check to proposals that don't fit the context.

**As the U.S. increases its troops numbers in Afghanistan, do you feel soldiers are getting the right kind of training and education?**

The ideal soldier would be a micro-financier with a doctorate in anthropology, speak Dari and Pashto, be an expert marksman, and have served as a mayor in a farming community. The military doesn't have the resources or time to produce this bionic counterinsurgent, but it can do a better job educating soldiers so that they're faster at learning and adapting in unfamiliar environments. We do a great job of making sure units have the weapons they need to fight, but in a counterinsurgency, often the best weapons don't shoot. The challenge is to fertilize units

with the right mix of additional specialties so that they've got the right "weapons" for this kind of fight.

**What do you hope people will take away after reading *The Unforgiving Minute*?**

I hope first that they find it entertaining to read. Second, I'd like people to close the book and have a better understanding of what America is asking of its men and women in uniform. I hope that some are inspired to contribute their own talents to national security in some capacity. Finally, I hope that future lieutenants learn something from my mistakes that helps them better accomplish their mission.

**How long did you spend writing this story? What was your writing routine?**

No one tells you when you begin a book how much time it's going to take. I began the book in the spring of 2006, but wrote most of it in the summer of 2007. Editing took me another year. I would wake up early, work out, and make an entire pot of coffee. I brought the coffee up to my home office in a thermos and shut the door. I'd disconnect from the Internet, flip my hourglass, and begin work. When the sand ran out in the hourglass, I allowed myself a short break to check email, use the bathroom, or return a call. But as soon as I flipped it back again, it was time to focus. In that fashion I'd write for eight or nine hours, log my word count in a spreadsheet, and call it a day. Multiply that by sixty days and you get carpal tunnel syndrome, a wife jealous of the computer, and a complete manuscript.

**What did you learn from writing the book that you hadn't learned from all the rigorous training you went through?**

The best writers cast a spell over their readers. They can take a total stranger and transport him or her effortlessly into an unfamiliar experience. There's nothing in Ranger School or West Point that can teach you that art. You can only hone that kind of creativity and control over language through disciplined practice. When it's done well, it's magic. I'm going to keep working at it in the hope of helping change the world through well-communicated ideas.

**Why did you dedicate the book to your younger brother Gary?**

This book is something of an open letter to him as he embarked on his own military career. What could I tell him that would help him accomplish his missions and bring his soldiers home from combat? He and his colleagues who are waging our wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere are a major part of my motivation in writing *The Unforgiving Minute*. Just as I learned from my mentors, I hope the next generation of military leaders finds something to gain from my experiences and that they in turn contribute their hard-won knowledge to the public domain.

**Where is your brother now? What happened after he graduated West Point?**

Gary is now serving in Savannah, Georgia with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. After graduating West Point, he completed armor training at Fort Knox and then volunteered to go to Ranger School.

Unlike me, he went straight through the course. I flew down to Fort Benning to pin on his new Ranger tab. It was my last day in uniform. He deployed to Iraq and arrived in Baghdad on the Fourth of July, 2008. Gary led a cavalry platoon in southern Baghdad and returned home in time for Christmas. When I welcomed him back, the only thing Gary wanted to eat was seafood. “You can’t get good crab legs in Baghdad,” he told us.

**Ten days after you left the military, you joined the Obama campaign as a national security adviser at the Chicago headquarters. What was it like to work with Senator Obama?**

My first day on the job I was told that I’d accompany Senator Obama two days later on a campaign trip to Colorado Springs. I worked around the clock preparing my briefing materials and showed up at the charter terminal in the early morning. After downing several cups of coffee, I followed the regulars out onto the tarmac. This was my first time riding on a private jet. I found a seat and continued reading over my work. When Senator Obama walked onto the plane, I immediately stood to attention (as I would for a commanding officer) and promptly banged my head on the overhead bin. So much for poise. Without skipping a beat, he smiled and extended his hand, “Barack Obama, nice to meet you.” He asked me to sit next to him for the flight and together we talked through a number of defense policy issues he expected to discuss with an editorial board that afternoon. I was immediately struck by how much he’d absorbed from the read-ahead memo I’d provided and the depth and sophistication of the questions he asked. He has an instinct for putting people at ease and a professor’s knack for quickly scoping the dimensions of a problem or argument. Before we landed, he asked me about the bracelet I wear on my wrist in honor of Evan O’Neill, the soldier in my platoon who’d been killed in action in Afghanistan. In the course of our discussion about Evan, a hard subject for me to talk about without tearing up, I was touched by Senator Obama’s compassion. Later in the summer, when the 500<sup>th</sup> casualty in Afghanistan was announced, he sent me a personal note recognizing what a hard day it was for me and letting me know how committed he was to turning around the situation in Afghanistan if he were elected. I truly believe that President Obama has the heart, intellect, and judgment to be a truly transformational Commander-in-Chief and I cherish the opportunity I had to serve him on the campaign. It was one of the most gratifying experiences I’ve had in my career.

**You were one of a handful of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans serving on the campaign. Did you observe any similarities between a military campaign and a political campaign?**

More than you’d think. One of the benefits of having the national headquarters in Chicago was that most of the staff had left their families and friends behind in order to serve on the campaign. To me, it felt a lot like a deployment. We worked long hours, away from home, as part of a team effort with a very clear win-or-lose mission. The Obama campaign had a culture of understated professionalism and collegiality that made me feel at home. Like the best commanders I’d had in the field, David Plouffe and David Axelrod conveyed a clear strategy, calm under pressure, and consistent enthusiasm. Oddly, the political lingo was similar to that of the Army, albeit with slightly different connotations. We had a “ground game” and an “air game.” There were “field operations” and debates about “tactics” and “strategy.” Sometimes we were on the “attack” and other times Senator McCain had us on “defense.” It occurred to me at one point that my campaign experience would be useful training for waging a counterinsurgency. Winning “hearts

and minds” in Afghanistan or independent voters in battleground states demands the same understanding of a community’s concerns and articulating a vision of hope that people can believe in. That said, the pizza was much better in Chicago.

**What’s next for you?**

Although I’ll be wearing pinstripes instead of camouflage, I hope to continue supporting my brothers- and sisters-in-arms by working on national security challenges in the Obama administration.