

LOOK INSIDE

IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS



VOICES OF LEADERSHIP,
SACRIFICE, AND SERVICE
FROM AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR



THE U.S. NAVAL ACADEMY CLASS OF 2002
JOSHUA WELLE, JOHN ENNIS, KATHERINE KRANZ
AND GRAHAM PLASTER
FOREWORD BY DAVID GERGEN



They were walking to class on 9/11 when the World Trade Center and Pentagon were hit. These midshipmen graduated from the United States Naval Academy into a nation at war, the first class to do so since Vietnam. The men and women of the Class of 2002 lost their youth to a decade of war and their innocence on battlefields in distant places. Each story provides a glimpse into the lives of modern-day military officers who were faced with unique challenges. Their stories bring to light the trials of war and reveal a world most do not understand. Refreshingly candid, their narratives take readers on a journey from Annapolis to the far corners of the world to experience operations at sea, on the land, and in the skies.

Prophetically inscribed on the Class of 2002's Naval Academy graduation rings are the words "in harm's way." *In the Shadow of Greatness* pays tribute to classmates who paid the ultimate price for their nation within years after graduation. Mothers of the fallen reflect on their children's loyalty to their country, contributors provide visceral accounts of courage under fire, and others recount hardship in unexpected places, beyond the sands of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The editors spent three years inviting their classmates to open their hearts and share experiences endured on the front lines. Serving as a virtual podium for those unlikely to speak about war, these first-person accounts are written with humility and respect for those with whom they served, bringing deserved recognition to all veterans of the era. As wars in Iraq and Afghanistan subside, those who depart the service are seeking a higher purpose at home. Read their stories of enduring commitment to country as they return from the battlefield and become leaders out of uniform.

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All proceeds from *In the Shadow of Greatness* will go to the U.S. Naval Academy Class of 2002, Inc., 501(c)(3) status pending, enabling organizations to support education, training, and excellence within the Navy, Marine Corps, and veteran community.

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IN THE
SHADOW OF
GREATNESS



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VOICES OF LEADERSHIP, SACRIFICE, AND SERVICE
FROM AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR

The U.S. Naval Academy Class of 2002

Edited by Joshua Welle, John Ennis,

Katherine Kranz, and Graham Plaster

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— DEDICATION —

TO THOSE WHO SERVED IN UNIFORM AFTER 9/11
AND THE THOUSANDS WHO NEVER RETURNED HOME
TO OUR NAVAL ACADEMY 2002 CLASSMATES WHO
LEFT THIS EARTH MUCH TOO EARLY
AND TO OUR MOTHERS, WHO ALLOWED US TO EMBARK
ON AN ADVENTURE OF SERVICE AND NEVER LOST FAITH





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FOREWORD

David Gergen

In the spring of 1994, preparing for the fiftieth anniversary of D-day, President Bill Clinton invited a group of veterans and scholars to the White House for a private session so that he might better understand that special moment from the past. Each visitor was stirring, but none more so than Steven Ambrose, a marvelous historian and storyteller.

As U.S. troops began to storm the beaches, German machine guns up on bluffs cut them to pieces. A senior officer would fall, and a junior officer would quickly fill in; he, too, would go down, and a noncommissioned officer would take command, pushing men forward. Had positions been reversed, so that Germans were pouring out of the landing craft, argued Ambrose, they would have stopped in the water and called Berlin for instructions—and they would have lost the most crucial battle of the war. But the men hitting those beaches, he said, were “sons of democracy”—young warriors who had learned to think and act for themselves, who had grown up in freedom and would instinctively step up in a time of crisis.

As Ambrose finished, all of us in the room wondered whether our young men and women of today could match the “greatest generation,” whether they had the right stuff. Ambrose insisted that if another moment came, despite the apparent softness of so many, the new generation would rise to the occasion because they, too, were “sons and daughters of democracy.” They, too, knew the blessings of liberty and would volunteer their lives.

Anyone who has the pleasure of reading the essays in this book would surely agree: Ambrose was right. The young men and women here were members of the first class to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy after al-Qaeda struck the United States. They rose to the challenge and soon became known as the “9/11 generation.” One day they could be called the “next greatest generation.”

Among the silver linings to be found in these past ten years of continuous war, there is one that shines brightest: the courage, character, and leadership of

the young men and women who have answered the country's call to duty. I see some of them every day passing through the hallways of Harvard and on other campuses. They are part warrior, part scholar, all leader.

The Naval Academy, for more than a century and a half, has produced some of America's finest warriors, scholars, and leaders, from Alfred Thayer Mahan and Albert Michelson to President Jimmy Carter and Senator John McCain. Years ago, I had the privilege of working with some of them during a stint as a naval line officer, a chapter distinctly unheroic but full of lessons about leadership. (Serving as a damage control officer was also great preparation for working in Washington.)

Speaking at the Naval Academy's commencement in 1916, ten months away from America's entry into World War I, President Woodrow Wilson told the graduates, "You do not improve your muscle by doing the easy thing; you improve it by doing the hard thing, and you get your zest by doing a thing that is difficult, not a thing that is easy." The young men and women who have written this book have voluntarily chosen the hard thing, and they richly deserve our honor and our appreciation. Just as much, they deserve our attention, because they have provided in this volume first-person accounts of courage and integrity under the most trying of circumstances. They tell us of crucible moments—coming to the aid of soldiers pinned down in Iraq, landing a Tomcat on a carrier in pitching seas, rescuing men from drowning, watching a buddy die. Women are right there on the front lines, again proving their worth. These stories are gripping; some are heart wrenching. All of them show what their generation has accomplished, can accomplish, and God willing, will yet accomplish.

Let's be clear: This book is military in subject matter, but national in scope and relevance. It is penned by those in uniform but is written for citizens and others of all stripes. These accounts will inspire, they will impress, but most important, they will fill you with hope that this rising generation, forged in tragedy and war and called to difficult, often thankless duty, will help all Americans, both in and out of uniform, unite to rise to the occasion once more.

INTRODUCTION

NON SIBI SED PATRIAE



The current generation of young Americans has its share of stereotypes. Many assume this group lacks vision and ambition or the ability to lead in a time of great peril. At Annapolis, we knew differently. We were the midshipmen of the United States Naval Academy, Class of 2002. We longed to be tested, to prove others wrong about their impressions. We wanted a destiny of purpose, a higher calling.

The Naval Academy, with its glossy catalog depicting college seniors saluting crisply and brandishing swords, promised to make us heroes. Perhaps only the enlisted service members of our class truly knew what uniformed service entailed, but for those fresh out of high school, the ideal of the Naval Academy was like an invitation to join King Arthur's Round Table. A magnificent chapel stands on the campus grounds. At the entrance, a magnificent door, twenty feet high, is inscribed *Non sibi sed patriae*—"Not for self, but for country."

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the purpose and test of seniors at the academy became clear. Al-Qaeda attacked the United States, and our commander-in-chief assumed the lead in protecting our allies and our coasts from threats to American interests. Our abilities as tacticians and deckplate leaders would be tested. Our moral compasses would be rattled and recalibrated amid the realities of war. We would suffer losses—of blood, friends, family, and innocence.

These times are of almost limitless access to free media, overwhelming consumption, and layers of instant gratification. We seek greater connectedness online, yet we must also acknowledge that the virtual public sphere fosters an unhealthy state of individualism. We have seen a growing cultural gap between the military and civilian sectors of American society that must be bridged. Integrity, the bedrock of leadership, is today a rare virtue, not a common character trait.

In the Shadow of Greatness presents first-person accounts of junior officers during two wars, on the front lines and at home, in times of valor, humor, and

tragedy. It explains how their experiences at Annapolis prepared them for what would be a decade at war. It also explores the nuances of a generation struggling to achieve something big—to earn the distinction of the next greatest generation.

This literary endeavor began in late 2009 after reflection on countless deployments, great victories, and much sorrow among various members of the Class of 2002. Their stories of bravery and service needed to be told. This book provides a podium for voices normally hesitant to write publicly about their experiences. The stories allow readers to meet an array of personalities; each writes in a way that every parent can enjoy and most people could be inspired. The body of work represents the effort of hundreds of people, among them advisers, classmates, friends, and professional writers; they all helped make this book a reality. The stories were selected from a pool of submissions to highlight the most important themes from this age of conflict.

The “war on terror” remains an ambiguous concept. We ask ourselves, time and again, Was it worth it? More than 6,000 American servicemen were killed and more than 46,000 wounded during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Thousands of Iraqi civilians were displaced, or worse, died from the armed conflict in their homeland. Now, with the United States suffering under the weight of crushing financial debt and a wide array of other domestic problems, the sacrifices of those who served run the risk of being eclipsed by the crises of the moment.

The writers in this volume are true believers. They have done a great deal of soul searching and invite you to join them on a journey of remembrance of their generation’s Long War. We all believe that the futures of Iraq and Afghanistan look promising, if not assured. We are bearing witness to a global community that has renewed its commitments to combating diffuse extremist groups.

More to the point, those who have served in a decade of conflict and are now returning from war are prepared and ready to lead our country through tumultuous times at home. More than a million men and women served in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2001 through 2011. This great reservoir of leadership is being tapped and called to duty at home, making America great again.

We, the members of USNA 2002, are humbled and proud to be among the many who have served, and we will continue to answer the call. We believe the nation is ready for a new generation of leaders, made up of men and women who have served after 9/11. These are our stories.

The Real Hurt Locker

Eric Jewell



Like an alarm, the phone rang in our detachment's tactical operations center. Having operated in Iraq for two months with more than a hundred missions in the rearview mirror, one might think that we'd become desensitized to the rush of adrenaline. That would be wrong. I still felt it every time the phone rang.

On this particular day, it was an urgent 911 call, delivered in the standard nine-line format. According to line four, there had been a car bomb, or vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED). The suicide bomber had driven onto the grounds of an Iraqi police headquarters and recruiting station. My explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teammates, Richie and Adam, looked over at me with the loyal resolve born of countless hours of working together under incredible pressure. I knew I could trust them with my life.

We double-checked our gear and then checked it again. I donned my body armor, hefting the familiar weight onto my shoulders, glancing down at my chest to quickly survey the ceramic bullet-stopping material secured within the chest pouch of the vest. This part of my routine was so familiar, it almost felt like a cadence as I opened and closed the Velcro strips around the super-hardened ceramic plates. Patting the vest twice with confidence, I looked up to see my teammates standing ready. We mounted up in the Humvee, yanking the heavy armored doors shut and immediately conducting standard communications checks. Part of me felt invincible; the other part shut off for a while, because whatever that part was, it wouldn't be useful for the mission at hand. I focused my thoughts, playing through scenarios in my mind, running mental simulations in preparation for the moment of action that was quickly approaching.

We linked up with our security element and headed off the base, "outside the wire." The whine of the Humvee's engines was piercing as we accelerated, driving in a tight convoy. Local civilian drivers were familiar with the sight of our military formation flying down highways en route to various objectives. They pulled

off to the side of the road just as we would if we heard an ambulance approaching back home.

The Iraqi police station was four kilometers away. As we navigated the streets we'd previously cleared of improvised explosive devices, I cautiously scanned the road for anything suspicious. We listened attentively for the periodic beep cuing us into the lead vehicle's tactical updates. We were thinking about the threat ahead, but also imagining the very real possibility of an unseen IED along the way.

We arrived on the scene unscathed and immediately saw the Iraqi police buzzing with activity. A crowd of twenty to thirty men had gathered as casual spectators. We had no idea who among them might be friendly and who might be hostile. A handful of the police spread out to stabilize the area. A white police truck was parked in front of what looked like a high-ranking police officer's office. Next to the building, twenty meters away, was a dilapidated, white sedan. I kept asking myself, "What could kill me right now? How do I take control of this scene?"

I directed our Army security element to set up a perimeter on opposite sides of the suspect vehicle. As they spread out to arrange for our protection, several of the Iraqi police approached my vehicle, obviously agitated and panicked. One of them explained through my interpreter that he was the chief of police and a newly assigned "bomb expert." I asked him where the device was located, and he replied that the suspected VBIED was the same white sedan I had observed no more than twenty meters from the group of spectators. We had no way to safely detonate the explosive device without endangering the civilians. "BIPing it," or "blow-in-place," was not an option. As the leader on the scene, it was my responsibility to somehow disperse the crowd, set a proper perimeter, and deal with the device.

Experience had eroded my trust in the generally corrupt Iraqi police. Nevertheless, I had to get people out of the way and somehow go to work on this deadly weapon. Thoughts of what might happen if the bomb detonated near the crowd were too tragic to consider in this moment. I cordoned the thought off in a part of my mind for later consideration. I had a mission to complete. The language barrier exacerbated the stress level exponentially as I attempted to maintain a clear and calm line of communication through the interpreter. As I spoke with the so-called bomb expert representing the Iraqi police, something didn't feel quite right. Sweat was pouring off his brow in the 115-degree July heat, but it seemed to be the cold sweat of nervousness. He also seemed to have a stutter in his voice. The translator conveyed to me, with a measure of concern all his own, the message, "I took it apart . . . I took it apart."

Richie prepared the iRobot PackBot to investigate the sedan, and Adam built up a bootbanger water disruption charge for our option of last resort—a remote disruption attempt and the possible high-order detonation of the device

(and vehicle). Part of me wanted to go straight to plan B and blow the car sky high. I didn't trust the police "chief." The tension kept building. An Iraqi army-police recruiting station was an attractive target for the insurgency. How could I know whether this "bomb tech" had put the VBIED there to target potential new recruits and my team?

Suddenly Adam's voice piped in on comms, "Lieutenant, I've got at least a half-dozen one-five-five projos daisy chained with det cord in the trunk. The det cord doesn't have an initiator that I can see, but I've got separate wires going into the backseat." In the vernacular, he said that in the back of the car there were at least six 155 mm projectiles, each carrying a heavy metal fragmenting shell with approximately twenty-five pounds of explosives, connected with explosive cord. He was viewing the device via the camera on the PackBot. He maneuvered it to view the backseat but couldn't trace the wires with 100 percent certainty. Meanwhile, I continued to question the Iraqi police chief, who conceded that the vehicle hadn't been searched from bumper to bumper, only in the trunk. I sensed his embarrassment of contradicting his earlier statement as I stared him down with disdain and continued to stay vigilant for signs of deception.

My team and I concluded that the potential for a high-order detonation would not be feasible, and 100 percent clearance could only be achieved by sending an operator downrange. I directed Richie to take charge uprange, and we talked through the emergency procedures. This would be the first time that I would wear the bomb suit on a live IED.

The forest green EOD VIII Med-Eng bomb suit went on piece by piece. My feet slid into the toe cups, and the flexible front armor wrapped around my legs, as Richie and Adam zipped up the trousers on the backside of my calves. The trouser suspenders slid over my shoulders like a bulky but comfortable pair of overalls. The additional armor groin-pad "diaper" Velcroed into place and the turtle shell-type spine armor completed my lower half of protection. The heavily padded and armored top half was donned from the front, arms in first. With armor, seams create a point of failure, and the EOD bomb suit was designed to absorb a forward facing blast. All the closures attached in the rear. The bulky neck dam flowed around the underside of my chin, designed to deflect a blast wave up and away from my vital grey matter upstairs. Last came the helmet and visor, completing my security cocoon.

I had a clear understanding of the objective and even had a sense of peace as I donned each article of the bomb suit. Richie and Adam double-checked me. The scene was certainly similar to several in the movie *The Hurt Locker*, yet it was also unique. I wasn't about to rush recklessly downrange to cut the blue wire, like some character in a movie. Everything had a process, and the process would work, as my training had led me to believe. My heart raced, but I refused to think

of anything but complete success. Adam attached my facemask, and the world went quiet. I could hear myself breathing and that was all.

A pull line trailed me as I approached the vehicle on foot. My teammates would use the pull line to yank me back if an explosion occurred. The line unwound from a wheel, slowly spinning as I closed in on the car. I saw the robot camera turn to look at me. I knew that my boys were behind its eyes, keeping watch on every move I made. If I made a mistake, they would quickly take my place to complete the mission. "Initial Success or Total Failure," the EOD motto, was branded in my mind, and I trusted my team to complete what we'd started, no matter the cost.

Twenty feet out. Ten feet away. On target. Doing my best to search the interior of the vehicle, I felt a bit like a little kid dressed by mom in a bulky snowsuit . . . in the middle of a 115-degree desert. The trunk was filled with ordnance, just as Adam had indicated. I determined that it was safe to continue and did a systematic assessment of the threat while trying to assume the perspective of the bomb maker. I found the wires Adam had mentioned and traced them under the backseats to more projectiles. With every moment I spent there and with every action I took, I felt like the IED got a little more pissed off. In our line of work, an EOD tech tends to personify the IED as he faces it one on one. The more one has to manipulate the device, the more one thinks it will defy one. After a quick snip and the tie of a "bowline" knot, however, I was ready to return to the boys uprange. I backed away carefully and felt as though I were dropping a two-ton elephant off my back. I had deactivated the bomb, and the stress was streaming out of my pores.

Adam and Richie welcomed me back to the world and greeted me with a bottle of water. My chest was pounding as they helped strip off the bomb suit, piece by piece. We shared a quick laugh as we moved to the final steps of rendering the device safe and tying up the operation. It was another one of the many events that cemented my love for those guys.

We were able to extract more than two hundred pounds of explosives from the sedan along with a lot of forensic evidence. From the rearview mirror, we were able to recover latent fingerprints that later led to an important intelligence development, a targeting package, and the capture of an insurgent bomb-making cell in the area. We found additional electrical components that helped us identify new bomb-making trends in the region. The icing on the cake was taking the ordnance to a remote location to make it disappear in the loudest and most violent way possible.

Our unit, EOD Mobile Unit 6, Detachment 12, accomplished 426 missions supporting the U.S. and Iraqi armies in and around Baghdad from January through July 2007, during the height of the troop surge. Our tasks were to

identify, neutralize, and render safe any explosive hazards and make the battlefield accessible to our troops while also protecting the local populace. When I returned home, some of this mission further crystallized as the locked corners of my mind opened and began examining it. There were feelings there that I'd locked away, such as fearful "what-ifs," and bottled-up tensions. In truth, adjusting to normal life was difficult after living and conducting operations in a culture of war. I worked at accepting that life goes on and summoned the courage to continue serving in my old environment with a forever-changed perspective.

I have learned so much from the men on my team, from the Iraqi people, from every breath counted in the brief silence of a moment downrange. I have learned that my alma mater's ideals—duty, honor, and loyalty—are more than worth fighting for. For this knowledge, those values, and the wonderful gift of freedom, I feel truly blessed by the grace of God.



Eric Jewell, front row, far left, with his EOD team in Baghdad. (Courtesy Eric Jewell)

From Fallujah to Now Zad

Benjamin Wagner



I watched through night vision goggles as Marines scrambled over the wall surrounding the cemetery. Our company commander, Capt. Doug Zembiec, had wanted us in position before the 0530 call to Muslim prayer. We were almost there, almost ready just as the prayer began to be broadcast from a loud-speaker atop a minaret. My radio hissed, and Captain Zembiec’s voice bellowed over the transceiver. We weren’t in position in time, and he was pissed.

What had I done wrong in preparing our assault? The infantry lieutenant’s greatest fear is missing the time appointed to cross the line of departure. “Never miss the LOD!” had been drilled into me during my training, yet here I was just a month into my first combat experience, and I was falling behind. I was trained for this mission, but for some reason this assault was different. I was different. I was no longer a junior enlisted Marine Corps grunt. Now I was the officer in charge—a position I had always dreamed of assuming—with all the trepidations and rewards of command.

We were part of a thirty-day marathon battle dubbed Fallujah One. The insurgents’ numbers were strong, with probably more than a thousand men spread out over several key posts across the city. The U.S. Marine battalions gathered, accompanied by Army and Navy air support, to seek out and defeat the enemy. I was a platoon commander, and it was my job to lead twenty-seven strong and disciplined Marines through this field of battle. Everyone had a role, but there were three men I relied on most. The first was SSgt. Willie Gresham, who was meticulous about everything and had had enough wartime experience to warrant the respect of the others. Next, Sgt. Terry Fullerton, who was capable and dependable and never let his guard down as first squad leader, which made him the perfect candidate to lead tailored missions. After them, I counted on my company commander, Captain Zembiec, for his strength and steadfast courage, although he didn’t know it. He had been an all-star wrestler at the Naval Academy and had mentored me during my sophomore year. I remember that during my first firefight, I had looked across the line of fire, and Captain Zembiec stared back

at me and smiled—a reminder that everything was going to be okay. We were all scared in combat. Anyone who says that fear is not part of combat is lying. Captain Zembiec had a confidence that calmed the storms.

My platoon and company had a simple but important role in Captain Zembiec's opinion: "Go pick a fight." On March 28, 2004, just a week after arriving in Iraq and relieving an Army battalion, we set out on our first patrol of Fallujah and took our first casualties. Eric Elrod and Juan Fernandez were wounded in an ambush crossing a large courtyard. We'd been too hesitant with our actions and uncertain about how aggressive to be. The rules of engagement are well defined back at headquarters, but protocol sometimes gets blurred in the field. We hesitated to fire at buildings or bring full combat power to bear because we had been following the counterinsurgency doctrine—"do no harm" to the population. Our mindset was to preserve the infrastructure and to limit the impact we had on the people of Iraq. We went days without sleep, but the men showed greater confidence with each contact.

On April 12, our platoon experienced its first Marine KIA, killed in action. That evening was one of the longest of my life. In a firefight that had begun at dusk, Robert Zurheide and Brad Shuder were mortally wounded. We had evacuated them without knowing if they would live or die. After the assault, I walked the lines checking on the remaining Marines. It wasn't too long before the report came from headquarters that the two men had died. My platoon sergeant took the message. He knew I was exhausted and wasn't sure how I would tell the others. As their leader, I felt this huge weight on my shoulders. I reminded myself that I wasn't the first platoon commander faced with telling his troops that some of their brothers had died.

I pulled my platoon into a huddle and told them that Rob and Brad had been killed. The men mourned, walked away, and continued the mission. As their leader, I couldn't shake the question, Were their deaths my fault? Communicating such a tragedy is not something one learns at the Academy, and it wasn't something I had practiced as a junior officer. I remained stoic in front of the platoon, but I was quickly learning that although leadership is an honor, it is also a great burden, and there's always room to become better at it.

★ ★ ★

My path to becoming a Marine officer was not a straight one. As high school was ending, I didn't feel ready to enter college life. I was used to my Southern California lifestyle of ska music and tattoos. Another four years of school didn't interest me. I wanted freedom, opportunity, and the ability to go places and do things. I was an athlete, but not good enough to be recruited, and I had little interest in school, books, and homework.

College didn't seem "big enough" for me at the time. I didn't want to wait four years to do something tangible with my life, so I decided to join the Marine Corps. My parents were wonderfully supportive, and although they would have preferred that I enter university right away, they encouraged me to succeed in whatever I chose to do. I was seventeen. My mother agreed to sign my enlistment papers for the Marine Corps Reserve, as long as it wasn't for the infantry, so I could attend college courses full time. After my eighteenth birthday, shortly before graduation, I changed my contract to active duty and requested an assignment in infantry. This change in direction was not a sign of rebelliousness; it was simply what I felt called to do.

As a young Marine stationed in Camp Pendleton, California, in the mid-1990s, life was good. I earned \$350 per paycheck twice a month. I had a place to sleep, food to eat, and best of all, our barracks were literally five minutes from the beach. I met great guys during that phase of my life. We worked hard, played hard, and took being grunts seriously. We were proud of our heritage and jealous of those who had fought in Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Somalia. Our squad leaders told us stories about the 1991 Persian Gulf War, after Iraq invaded Kuwait.

After a couple of years, I realized that I wanted more than an enlisted man's life. I had respect for those I worked with, but I was more intrigued by our platoon commanders. The way they interacted with one another and with the upper chain of command was different; they exhibited a level of knowledge and responsibility that I craved. I wanted the camaraderie and bonds of the officer corps. The seeds of leadership had been planted. In particular, I noticed the lieutenant in charge of my platoon. He seemed to have it together, and I wanted to know if I could handle that level of responsibility, too.

I had applied to the Naval Academy as a senior in high school but was rejected. Over the years, I had thought about applying again, but I had no idea how to do so as an enlisted Marine. When I got a new platoon commander who was a USNA grad, I saw an opportunity to get the advice I was looking for. My second lieutenant found out that I'd once applied and encouraged me to try again. I did and was accepted; fifteen months later, after a year at the Naval Academy Preparatory School, I was inducted into the Class of 2002. The Academy had afforded 150 billets in each class to prior-enlisted men and women. The reason for admitting students with Fleet experience was to add diversity to the learning environment. Regardless of the reason, I was in. I finished my tour in California, was given ten months of preparatory education in Newport, Rhode Island, and arrived in Annapolis on July 1, 1998. I had gone from a corporal in the Marine Corps to a Naval Academy plebe, probably one of the biggest demotions in the history of the military.

As a prior-enlisted man, I had more ribbons and real-world experiences than many of those senior to me walking around Bancroft Hall, the USNA dormitory. I was twenty-two years old when I entered USNA, and I immediately earned the respect of my peers and seniors. That respect was also mine to lose. I felt a responsibility to lead by example because I knew what enlisted personnel expected from officers. For four years, my shoes were the shiniest, my haircut was tight, and I had a pressed uniform when others let the standards drop. My personal daily routine was a source of pride.

Mentors at USNA come in all forms. I met Doug Zembiec during my younger year. Little did I know that four years later, he would be my company commander and one of my most important mentors. He was a Force Recon Marine and all-star wrestler from the Class of 1995. Capt. Richard Gannon was another one of my closest advisors, as we both participated in the extracurricular Semper Fi Society. Both Zembiec and Gannon would be killed in combat in Iraq. They were giants to me, true heroes.

I quickly transformed from a Marine infantryman with a narrow focus into a quirky history student influenced by some of the most adroit leaders in naval service. Professors Mary Decredico and Ernie Tucker, who taught my military history courses, were mentors in their own way, showing me the gateway into the minds of the American military's finest leaders. Even Woody in the barbershop made an impact on me; he was one of the most dedicated people I met in my four years at the Academy. A loving father and a humble veteran, he instilled wisdom in us midshipmen and made those twelve-minute haircuts count for something.

My senior year, I was selected to be Brigade commander, the highest-ranking midshipman, and gained access to some of the military's finest leaders. General Peter Pace and Colonel John Allen were my early mentors. They taught me about the personal side of leadership in combat and about the importance of leading with honor. As Brigade commander, I was the conduit for the administration and was charged with leading my peers and the Brigade in the aftermath of 9/11. This experience helped me understand the pressures on general officers, something that would help years later on the front lines.

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No amount of schooling could have prepared me for the emotions I experienced when Rob and Brad were killed under my command. During my second combat tour in Iraq, I was again faced with casualties. Although I was just one year removed from the Marines I had lost in Fallujah, this time I felt like a different person. I remember talking on the radio to my company commander while watching my corpsman try to resuscitate a mortally injured Marine. Although I

still felt compassion for the tragedy before my eyes, I was callous to the magnitude of it all; this was war after all.

The pain of losing men in combat weighs heavily on a leader's heart. It's more than a lump in the throat or a pang of hurt; it's like a car parked on one's chest. I thought back to the lessons I'd learned from my mentors while at the Naval Academy. I remembered General Pace, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaking to a group of midshipmen about his experiences during the Tet Offensive regarding the moral imperative of the officer. I thought back to the lessons delivered by Colonel Allen, our Commandant of Midshipmen, about the importance of character and the influence of the officer on his or her Marines and sailors. I thought about the way Captain Gannon, 13th Company officer, trained me to influence the lives and character of my Marines. Dealing with death as a military officer is the product of leadership lessons I learned from mentors, books, and personal involvement.

Much of my experience at the Naval Academy, and in some ways my philosophy of life, had been shaped by Sen. Jim Webb's *A Sense of Honor*. As a plebe, I empathized with the Midshipman Dean's frustration over foolish Bancroft Hall traditions and the brainwashing that plebes received. As a firstie, I understood Midshipman Bill Fogerty's desire to serve and live out his destiny as a combat leader. As a combat veteran, I empathized with Captain Ted Lenahan's pain. Captain Lenahan, a company commander in Vietnam, had lost many good men. Each of these men reflected a stage of development that mirrored my own journey.

In Fallujah, Ubaydi, and Hit, in Iraq, and Helmand, in Afghanistan, I suffered losses under my command. I knew what Captain Lenahan felt when he visited wounded Marines in Bethesda. I understood the depth of his pain and his commitment to "doing it right." All of this became clear when I cried with Brad Shuders's parents at their home. It was understandable when I visited my Marines in the hospital and saw their broken bodies, but I didn't really understand it until I'd cried with widows and parents and hugged Marines who were missing limbs, possibly unable to ever run or walk again. There is no desire on my part to seek pity for myself or those wounded. It's simply a fact that only those who have devoted their lives to guarding their country in a time of war can truly grasp the depth of these lessons.

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A lot changed after my platoon commander days in Iraq. During my shore billet, between tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, I'd spent three years as an instructor at the Basic School and the Infantry Officer Basic Course in Quantico, Virginia. My experiences at Basic School were profound. Along with twenty other combat veterans, I trained the Marine Corps' up-and-coming generation of infantry officers.

I demanded that the rising infantry officers be ready to lead in combat. In doing so, I refined my own skills and technically sharpened my understanding of war-time doctrine. Would I be ready to lead like Doug Zembiec had?

The next time I was in harm's way was as a company commander in Helmand province, Afghanistan, in 2010. The number of men under my charge was triple what it had been during my first fight. My company had been assigned to secure the Now Zad district in Helmand, an area where some of the fiercest Taliban took refuge. Our mission was to prevent the insurgents from moving from the central mountainous areas into the southern districts to sell weapons, opium, and other contraband.

On October 17, 2010, my company was engaged in a firefight. We moved south by vehicle and helicopter to trap the insurgents in an area the enemy knew. As we searched buildings and talked to local farmers, I got a call that one of my blocking forces was engaged with enemy fire three kilometers away. We loaded up and moved to their position. In transit, I heard a report of a casualty. An unforgiving lump began to develop in my throat, and I expected to hear the worst.

My initial reaction had always been to ask who had been wounded. I had to be especially cautious now because any emotion I showed over the radio would



Former Naval Academy Brigade commander Ben Wagner (far right) stands with his junior officers in Helmand, Afghanistan. (Courtesy Ben Wagner)

affect the men around me. The report came that one of our corpsmen, Doc Speed, had been shot. As we arrived on the scene, I sent two vehicles to cordon off a nearby farmhouse. I couldn't think about Doc. I was amped for a fight and eager to kill those who put my men in danger. Despite the fear, heat, and pain felt by me and my men, everything felt right. We were in the crucible of war, but I felt strangely in control, after my days as a corporal in Pendleton, hours of midshipman training, and intense battlefield scares in Iraq. Thankfully, Doc survived, and we pressed on.

My tour in Afghanistan was one of the true honors and highlights of my many years of service. I can honestly say that the Marines in Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, served with honor, dignity, and grace. They ruthlessly hunted a determined enemy, and when necessary they killed with skill and precision. We guarded and secured the people of Now Zad, and we made the district a safer and more successful community than it had been when we first encountered it. It was an honor to lead this group of Marines as their company commander. My greatest hope as I continue in the Marine Corps is that I am able to pass along the many leadership lessons from my mentors to men who, just like myself, are learning to live the highs and lows of combat leadership.

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The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This sentiment is exhibited throughout *In the Shadow of Greatness: Voices of Leadership, Sacrifice, and Service from America's Longest War*. Drawing on contributions from more than one hundred authors, advisers, friends, and family members, this book is a team endeavor.

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Thank you readers, who by picking up this book have expressed faith in the United States of America. We hope it helps you to better understand its modern military and inspires you to learn more about its veterans. Whether civilian or military, Americans must always stand together in service, promoting freedom and protecting democracy against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS

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The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier’s Education

“To the Class of 2002, I thank you for sharing your stories and opening America’s eyes to the challenges faced by your generation, which in my view really is the next ‘greatest generation.’ . . . My advice to you is simple: Continue to listen, learn, and lead in the decades ahead. Your families and your fellow citizens are counting on you.”

ADM. MIKE MULLEN, U.S. NAVY (RET.), 17th Chairman of
the Joint Chiefs of Staff, from the epilogue



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