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Milo S. Afong, *HOGs in the Shadows: Combat Stories from Marine Snipers in Iraq*. New York: Berkley Caliber, 2007. Pp. viii, 259. ISBN 978-0-425-21751-1.

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This collection of twelve separate stories focuses on specific combat engagements involving individual U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) snipers, or HOGs (Hunters of Gunmen), operating in Iraq from 2003 until late 2005. The author himself was a Marine Sergeant and fully-qualified sniper. This is not the first book about snipers in Iraq. As a genre, “sniper-orientated” works have recently developed into something of a cottage industry. The popularity of such literature is not hard to comprehend. At a time when many conceptions of modern warfare suggest remote, or even “virtual,” detachment, the intimacy and independence of sniper operations, popularly characterised by the idea of “one shot, one kill” and the conception of a hunt, or even duel, on the fringes of a battle, have the appeal of a personal, heroic, struggle. Afong’s objective is simply to gather a number of such combat stories in one volume.

The HOGs in this book are all USMC non-commissioned officers classified as fully-qualified Scout-Snipers. They are portrayed as professional, dedicated warriors. As one might expect, this collection of combat stories features many adrenalin-laden tales of personal bravery in life-or-death situations. Unfortunately, the author’s prosaic and irritating third-person style of narrative is more reminiscent of sensationalized fiction than of a serious personal recollection or memoir:

Romeo’s world was moving in hyper speed. Every noise was elevated. He could hear the sounds of marines yelling and of bullets hitting the trees around him. A few zipped close by. Everything seemed surreal. He glanced at the marine who was shot and lying on the ground. He was out of the way of the enemy gunfire, and his squad was unleashing their arsenal but he still couldn’t advance. They were pinned down just fifty meters to the left of Romeo’s team and someone in the tank hulks was taking well-aimed shots at them (28).

More might have been achieved by allowing each protagonist to speak for himself rather than retelling his story in such a style.

*HOGs in the Shadows* nonetheless, sometimes with surprising honesty, provides insight into the experiences of Marine snipers serving in Iraq. Afong departs from sniper narratives of former conflicts (for example WWII or Vietnam), which concentrated on marksmanship, fieldcraft, ballistics (in mathematical detail), and the tenets of patience, camouflage, and concealment. By contrast, this work stresses the more dramatic aspects of a sniper’s work. Neglecting less glamorous duties like such as scouting, surveillance, and reconnaissance, it vividly conveys the confusion and chaos experienced in fighting an unconventional enemy in urban terrain in Iraq. Also highlighted are the evident tribulations of target identification, problems of dealing with insurgents and civil populations, and the constant issue of friendly fire. The chapters on the Fallujah operations in 2004, in particular, emphasize such difficulties very effectively. But, although the narratives provide a good sense of the complexities of sniper operations, they are not properly analyzed or engaged with in the main text itself.

The sniper’s experience of killing by precise marksmanship, even if aided by magnifying scopes and sophisticated spotting equipment, is always a very personal one, a conscious decision carried out against an unsuspecting foe. This makes the psychology of the sniper’s training especially relevant. “It’s during ... training that I believe a sniper develops his ideas about killing. Marine snipers have a tremendous reputation that carries over from past generations. With such an illustrious history in combat also come expectations. Because of the countless hours spent training, most snipers feel a desire to ‘get a kill.’ ... From the very beginning of a sniper’s training, his entire goal is to do just that” (5).

Despite the highly personal nature of the killing, this mentality seems to have shielded the author and most of his colleagues from any emotional response. Questions of morality and conscience are hastily dismissed with the oft-repeated dictum that every enemy killed saves the life of a sniper’s colleague: “Some people say they are haunted by the people they have killed but in my experience, it’s the ones I have missed that do the haunting” (8). The detached professionalism of the HOGs is the overarching

theme of this work: “He’d heard stories of what it was like to kill and read about others who did so and how they felt at the time. He had thought about this moment many times before and wondered what it would feel like. But he felt no emotion of joy or excitement, and he didn’t feel sorry, either. He just felt that he did what he was trained to do” (31).

Professionalism is one thing, over-enthusiasm to the point of obsession another. “He ... had spent years training to kill, and he wanted all of his hard work validated by seeing the bodies personally. He wanted the satisfaction of knowing without a doubt that he had a kill” (54). When one sniper platoon had yet to score, “this made getting a kill within the platoon a competition; everyone wanted to be the first” (55). In another case, “excitement filled Clifton’s heart. He was glad he’d finally completed what he was trained to do. He realised this was just the start of the action, and there would be plenty more people to shoot. Then greed set in. He began to fantasize about all the kills he would get” (44). Competition is sometimes taken to excess. One chapter recounts a sniper’s “killing spree”—his continual “need to hunt consumed” him (107). Some reflection about the thought processes and emotions of such a man would have been welcome, but Afong instead glibly explains that: “For him, sniping was extremely personal. He wanted to finish off as many men as he could. He felt lucky to have seen the action that he had ... because after that, the action died off” (112).

There is a distinctly adolescent tone about several visceral descriptions of killing and rejoicing in killing: “After he fired, Reyes watched through his spotting scope as the vapor trail from the bullet swirled down and disappeared. It was a strange sight to see the man’s head explode, and he was beside himself when he saw it. He was in awe because it was the first time he actually got a good view of something like that. Reyes was overjoyed for his partner and congratulated him on his second kill—plus it was a phenomenal shot.... Rolling onto their sides, they gave each other high fives” (125–26).

Also disturbing is the casual use of derogatory or racist words: “Seconds after he shot, Mulder watched the man fall to the ground. He noticed that this hajji’s head did the same as the last one ... Hamblin was shooting them in the head.... Their gig was up. The Iraqis on the other side of the truck watched as a bullet separated their friend’s brains from his skull” (57).

It is axiomatic that war is a dirty, bloody business, but certain tactics employed by snipers, such as the deliberate wounding of a man to draw out his compatriots (130), are especially ruthless in the context of “surgical” counter-insurgency operations undertaken in Iraq. Even granting the psychological benefits of terrorizing a foe, the description of the bodies of sniper victims being eaten by feral animals is gruesome:<sup>1</sup> “when the animals had their fill, he noticed that parts of bodies had been eaten clear to the bone. And for him it was satisfying to know that insurgents were nearby, behind cover, helplessly watching this happen” (104).

While the blunt honesty of the work is refreshing, the absence of any real effort to reflect upon the brutality of the sniper’s work is a real defect. Afong admits that the confusion of target selection “makes the decision to take a person’s life unsettling for some” though “for others it’s an adrenaline rush.” He advises that “a sniper has to have the maturity and integrity not to be overcome by that power, especially when emotions are involved” (10). Thus, when a sniper learns that his shot has severed the arm of a teenager who was digging holes for insurgents, the question of morality is only fleetingly hinted at: “For May, the exhilaration of his first shot quickly passed, washed away by the anticipation of the rest of his deployment. He had only been in Husaybah three days, and he had shot a fourteen-year-old” (200). The book often assigns more professional shame to those who miss a target (the most grievous of sins for a marksman) than to those who might, for example, shoot a child. About his own fatal shooting of a different fourteen-year-old boy, who had been using binoculars to direct insurgent mortar strikes, Afong merely reflects that: “during the debrief, I wondered why that kid was on the battlefield. I didn’t really care that he was dead; he shouldn’t have been out there. I knew when I arrived that there’s no age limit on who wants to kill you in this country. But I put myself in his shoes. If someone had come to my town, seeming to be conquerors, I would probably help to fight them, too. It was all just an unfortunate consequence of war” (254–55).

*HOGs’* mandate is clearly to entertain rather than educate or inform. The lack of any connecting narrative between chapters and the quick pace of the story telling leave little room for insightful com-

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1. And reminiscent of European literature’s first account of warfare: [Achilles’ wrath] “made their bodies spoil for the dogs and all the birds” (*Iliad* 1.4–5).

ment or even basic character development. The hackneyed, cliché-ridden, and unreflective writing prevents any real portrayal of the anguish, emotion, humor, in short, the humanity of individual soldiers found in the best war memoirs. The abiding impression of insensitivity is especially unpalatable in a work published during ongoing military operations in Iraq.