

Intelligence in Public Media

The Fighters: Americans in Combat in Afghanistan and Iraq

By C.J. Chivers (Simon and Schuster, 2018), 374 pp.

Reviewed by Brent Geary

“The battlefield did not care about reputations, appearances, or wishes. It simply snatched lives.” (210)

American young men and women born just before or after the September 11, 2001, attacks are now old enough to deploy to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or elsewhere to combat global terrorism. Take that in and process it for a moment. According to a recent study by the United States Institute of Peace, the war on terrorism sparked by 9/11 has taken the lives of roughly 10,000 Americans and injured another 50,000 and cost the American people an estimated \$5.9 trillion. Roughly three million Americans have served in combat zones during that time, including untold numbers of intelligence officers, diplomats, and other government employees.

Because these conflicts continue, it is probably too soon to assess their merits strategically, and historians have yet to wade into the subject in a comprehensive manner. However, like wars that came before, what some would call the “first draft” of that history—primarily from the tactical and personal levels—is emerging even before the guns have gone silent. *The Fighters*, by C.J. Chivers, is one such early effort at capturing the gritty reality of combat in the war on terrorism from the perspective of those who fought it and witnessed it firsthand.

It is hard to imagine that a better ground-level account will ever replace it. Chivers, with this book and his newspaper articles from which it is derived, has carried on the work started by the legendary Ernie Pyle in World War II and continued by reporters like Michael Herr in Vietnam, and his starkly visceral and intimate reporting is worthy of comparison to both. His chronicling of the human toll of war reads like a direct descendant of Pyle’s description of the vast scale of suffering and death at Omaha Beach and Herr’s telling of a teenage Marine at Khe Sanh whose permanent smile “verged on the high giggles” but whose eyes seemed to say: “I’ll tell you why I’m smiling, but it will make you crazy.”

Chivers tells the stories of six combatants from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, including infantrymen, two pilots, a member of the Special Forces, and a Navy corpsman (medic), along with those with whom they served. Some of the combatants Chivers covers served multiple combat tours, and he follows them through their deployments and their return home. Five of the six survived their wars, and only two were seriously wounded, but all suffered and will carry scars for the rest of their lives. “Together,” Chivers wrote, “their journeys hold part of the sum of American foreign policy in our time.” (xviii) With his carefully chosen cross-section of combatants, he shows in clear and brutal terms that their stories share much in common and that there are untold thousands just like them.

Chivers is among the most accomplished war correspondents of this century. He served as a Marine infantry officer in the 1991 Persian Gulf War and has covered conflicts across the globe since 1999. In 2017 he won a Pulitzer Prize for his long-form article about an Afghanistan war veteran who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The article—a *New York Times Magazine* piece titled “The Fighter”—should be read along with *The Fighters*. In it, Chivers chronicled a Marine “designated marksman” named Sam Siatta who was revered for his prowess with a precision rifle but who struggled terribly with guilt derived from his actions in combat. After a particularly intense firefight, Siatta wrote in his journal, “I go to sleep every night knowing I have the blood of so many on my hands and no amount of soap could ever wash these stains away.” One of Siatta’s commanders confessed to Chivers his own sense of guilt for the role he played in Siatta’s life. “Watching Sam evolve from that sweet, innocent kid to that killer he became, the killer we needed him to be,” he said, “it breaks my heart.”

These are stories of modern war experienced by modern warfighters in the most advanced and capable military on the planet, and Chivers masterfully conveys their experiences on their own merits, largely avoiding wider discussion of the relative wisdom of the wars or

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those who led them. Some critics have argued that he should have included the views and experiences of senior commanders, but that was never Chivers' intent. He wrote that he wanted to tell the stories of those who fought and leave it at that. That clarity of purpose gives the book greater focus and avoids distracting the reader from the warfighters' experiences. By sticking almost exclusively to their stories, Chivers also makes his book accessible to readers regardless of their views on the wars, a task that would have proven more difficult the higher up the chain of command he went. In his preface, he is unsparing in his critique of the wars, but his criticism is balanced and fair. "It is beyond honest dispute," he wrote, "that the wars . . . failed to achieve what their organizers promised, no matter the party in power or the officers in command." It is a credit to Chivers that he focuses thereafter on what he does best—reporting on moment-by-moment combat and combatants—and *The Fighters* is better for it.

Chivers spares no feelings, and his book is a relentless cycle of firefights and resulting combat trauma with only brief intermissions devoted to assessments of the wars' aftermath by and for those who fought it. He quotes combatants liberally and lets them tell their own stories when possible. He has chosen fighters who all appear to have tried to do their jobs to the best of their abilities while maintaining a hold on their own morality.

Navy fighter pilot Layne McDowell, for example, served on for decades with a constant worry that he might have accidentally killed civilians in the air campaign over Kosovo in 1999. His commanders never questioned the bombing, but McDowell could never quite let it go. Chivers describes in haunting detail a nightmare McDowell had years later about the incident, where he envisioned his own young son dead in the rubble. He stated later that he was glad when he returned from missions over Afghanistan having not had to release any ordnance, and he eventually chose to leave the Navy's "fast track" to accept assignments that gave him more time with family.

Leo Kryszewski, the son of a Chicago janitor, was a seasoned Special Forces sergeant on 9/11 with 15 years of experience. He was among the first US soldiers into Afghanistan and later Iraq. It was there, in March 2003, that he and his team found themselves stuck between two parts of the larger US advance across southern Iraq and had to run a gauntlet of surprised Iraqi troops to cross a bridge in unarmored light trucks. Once across, his team learned of an impending counterattack by Iraqi armor

units to their front and did the unthinkable: they drove back the way they came, through a hail of bullets and rocket-propelled grenades, miraculously without any casualties. In 2004, on his second tour in Iraq, Kryszewski narrowly survived a rocket attack at an American base near Baghdad that killed the Green Beret standing next to him along with two other soldiers and wounded another 25 and two civilians. Kryszewski and a fellow soldier—convalescing in Germany two days after the attack—learned that their fallen comrade would be memorialized at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in the coming days. With help from a third soldier, they snuck away from their military hospital, boarded a commercial flight for the States—where merciful flight attendants allowed them to sleep on the galley floor—and made it back in time for the ceremony. Kryszewski recovered from his wounds and returned to war zones several times, both as a soldier and later as a contractor, but he struggles with PTSD.

Mike Sledobnik piloted Kiowa light attack helicopters for the Army in both Iraq and Afghanistan and had served for 18 years before seeing combat. Chivers recounted in riveting detail missions Sledobnik flew in both theaters, including a 2005 ambush of US helicopters by Iraqi insurgents that heavily damaged Sledobnik's Kiowa and left fellow pilot Lori Hill with a bullet wound through the sole of her foot and her ankle. Part of Chivers' great accomplishment with this book is his eye for details that humanize the actors and give their lives and experiences greater resonance. In this case, he quoted Hill as she was being taken, bloodied, from her damaged aircraft to be treated for her wounds. "At least I painted my toenails," she joked. Like McDowell, Sledobnik sometimes suffered from nightmares. In his case, he dreamt that he died in combat. Seven years to the day after the 9/11 attacks, a bullet through his leg killed him in Afghanistan. Chivers recounts in almost minute-by-minute detail, over ten pages, the struggle by Sledobnik's copilot to return the stricken aircraft to base, the efforts made at first aid, and the rapid airlift by Sledobnik's fellow pilots to a military hospital, too late to save their friend. As is the case throughout *The Fighters*, it is clear that Chivers interviewed everyone involved and made every effort to get the details right, making Sledobnik's story hit home that much harder.

Robert Soto was only 18 when he deployed with the Army to the Korengal Valley of Afghanistan in 2008.^a He

a. The following year, part of his larger unit—Second Platoon, Battle Company of the 173rd Airborne Brigade—was the subject of

grew up in New York City and was 10 years old on 9/11. He visited the pile of rubble where the towers had been and made up his mind that he wanted to serve when he was old enough. His first squad leader was Staff Sergeant Nathan Cox, an older grunt whom Soto came to admire. Cox loved to read, and upon learning that he had never read *A Catcher in the Rye*, Soto ordered a copy and had it sent to Afghanistan to give to him. He also became close with Specialist Marques Knight, like Cox an Iraq veteran. Soto and Knight had the same taste in rap music, and Knight told him he planned to visit Brazil someday, to see a foreign country not at war. Within days of each other, first Knight then Cox died in combat, the latter before Soto could give him his book. Soto usually rode with Cox in his Humvee but had been ordered to another assignment on the day Cox was killed—along with another soldier—by a powerful roadside bomb. Soto later took part in a textbook ambush of Taliban fighters in April 2009, personally shooting several enemy fighters. Days later, his own unit was ambushed while on patrol, and a newly arrived replacement was killed by an IED. Soto left the military after four years and graduated from Columbia University in 2017. He told Chivers he was “crushed” when he learned the Army had abandoned the Korengal Valley but that he understood the decision. (336)

Jarrod Neff was a Marine lieutenant who led a rifle platoon in a large-scale, heliborne assault on the Afghan city of Marja in 2010. Neff and his men occupied several homes on the western approach to the city on the first night of the operation, along with Marines from other platoons. One home had been predesignated as a command post for the coming sweep of the city, and the Marines evacuated the family who lived there to another home, one further away from the coming fight. On the second day, after intense fighting, the Marines called in an artillery strike on Taliban locations. By tragic mistake, American rockets fell instead on the home housing the family Neff and his men had evacuated, killing nearly everyone inside, mostly women and children. Twelve dead, all told. Neff led a small team to assess the damage, collect the bodies, and load them aboard a US aircraft for burial away from the battle. According to Chivers, the

Restrepo, an award-winning documentary about life and combat at Firebase Restrepo, named for a soldier killed nearby in 2007. Like *The Fighters*, *Restrepo* and a follow-on film in 2014, *Korengal*, represent some of the finest early accounts of the war on terrorism from the ground-level, and this reviewer strongly recommends them.

Marine Corps at first publicly denied the targeting error—claiming the rounds hit their intended targets—but then later owned up to the mistake. After days of fighting, Neff and his company accomplished their part of the mission—capturing a strategic crossroads—and Marja fell to the Marines, for the time being. Neff left the Marines in 2011 and took a job as a police officer, his lifelong ambition. By 2017, Chivers wrote, the Taliban had retaken control of Marja. (339)

Chivers’ depiction of the experiences of Dustin Kirby is arguably the most profound account of the book. Kirby followed his cousin, Joe Dan Worley, off to join the ranks of Navy combat corpsmen, those who treat the wounded in a Marine Corps that has never fielded medics of its own. When Worley lost a leg to an IED in Iraq, Kirby’s immediate family in Georgia hoped that meant he would come home unharmed, assessing that such things did not hit the same family twice. Chivers had watched Kirby perform his duties treating the wounded in Iraq, including saving the life of a Marine shot in the head by a sniper. He describes a young man who had believed in what he was doing but been terribly shaken by his cousin and hero’s maiming. “Doc” Kirby pressed on, though, and after breaking a unit rule by urinating in an empty bottle one night rather than going to the latrine, he received a stint of guard duty as punishment. While standing that duty atop a base tower in 2006, an insurgent sniper shot him through the face, destroying his lower jaw and many teeth in the process. Chivers details the years of pain and only partially successful surgeries Kirby endured as a result of his wounds and his spiral into depression, divorce, alcoholism, and attempted suicide. Early in his recovery, Kirby was unable to talk and had to communicate by writing messages to his family. His fear was palpable when he wrote to his mother after one of his surgeries, “If I stop breathing, will you help me?” (313) Kirby later remarried and in 2016 received spectacular treatment from surgical specialists in New York City who reconstructed his face and teeth, pro bono. His mother, Gail, wondered to Chivers why Dustin had to get pro bono help for something the government should have fixed. (348)

Possibly the most riveting scene in *The Fighters* happens not in a combat zone but in a private meeting between Kirby, his family, and former President George W. Bush in November 2013 at Bush’s office in Texas. After exchanging small talk, Gail Kirby began to speak. “He tried killing himself by driving his truck into a tree at

speeds in excess of 120 miles an hour,” she said. “I am not the same mom who sent her son to Iraq. I’m different now.” “Gail had prepared a monologue and practiced its lines overnight,” Chivers wrote. The result was devastating. Kirby’s mother told Bush that sending her son off to war was like having her baby sitting in a car seat in the middle of a highway, with cars zipping past at high speeds, and having to watch it—in anguish—every day on television while hundreds of other babies, dressed just like hers, sat on the same road. She described her shame at feeling relief when she learned that some other mother’s baby had died, but not hers. The Kirbys were respectful of Bush, and they saw in him someone who cared enough to meet with them and hear their stories. He told them he was sorry for what happened to them and accepted responsibility for the war. After hearing Gail’s analogy and expressing his sorrow for what they had been through, Bush thanked them for coming, smiled to Kirby, and gave him a fist bump. “Make better decisions,” Bush told him. Chivers ended the chapter with those words, al-

lowing the reader to pause and render their own judgment on what they had just read.

After two decades of covering America’s wars at the ground level, Chivers last year said that he planned to spend the foreseeable future running his small commercial fishing operation in Rhode Island, and “living largely without the f*cking internet or the phone . . . and not having to think about this sh*t.” Elected officials and senior diplomats, intelligence officers, and military commanders do not have that option; they do not get to tune out the realities of war. They hold no higher responsibility than the protection of the American people, including and especially our citizen soldiers. For that reason, *The Fighters* belongs on their reading lists and permanent bookshelves to serve as a stark reminder of what lies beyond diplomacy, espionage, and covert action for those we ask to go into harm’s way. To paraphrase retired Admiral James Stavridis, war as a policy tool is akin to surgery as a health care option. “It’s painful. It’s high-risk. Things go wrong,” he said. Wiser words were never spoken.



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