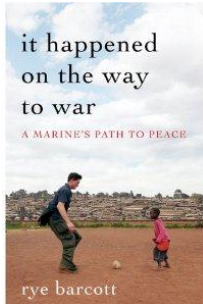


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Book Review: It Happened on the Way to War: A Marine's Path to Peace

by Rye Barcott

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Reviewed by Michael Few¹

Rye Barcott's memoir, *It Happened on the Way to War: A Marine's Path to Peace*, is a study in opposites. There is the man he was, a combat veteran torn by the legacy of war, and the man he is striving to be, the humanitarian on a quest to end poverty at the local level in one distant slum. Following allegations that key moments in Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* were fabricated, I delved cautiously into Barcott's book, fearing that I was buying a fourth cup of snake oil. But after reading the book, hearing Barcott speak, and talking to others associated with his charity, Carolina for Kibera (CFK), I doubt that this nonprofit was erected to brand Rye Barcott. The book can be enjoyed on its own terms as an emotionally, inspiring coming of age story. The core idea is that of the longstanding theory of participatory development, an alternative, indirect approach to empowering the poor. Rye Barcott merely serves as the vessel showing the evolution of CFK from theory into practice through his travels in North Carolina, Kenya, Bosnia, Djibouti, Iraq, and Massachusetts. CFK seeks to develop local leaders, catalyze positive change and alleviate poverty in the Kibera slum of Nairobi. The lingering question remains: will CFK succeed?

As a child, Rye felt the urge to do. As he grew older, the will to action was articulated by a strong sense of duty instilled by his father, a sociologist and veteran of the Vietnam War, and his pacifist mother, an anthropologist and professor of nursing. He writes that "his greatest fear was living an ordinary life." Rye accepts a Naval ROTC scholarship to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) and decides to major in war, peace, and defense studies. These decisions were unique in the pre-9-11 era. Most of Rye's peers focused on business so that they could enter the high-paying financial and technology sectors. Instead, he had to confront the problems of ethnic violence, genocide, dire poverty, revolution and foreign intervention -- overwhelming, exhausting worlds far removed from the comforts and shelter of suburban America. Rye got his wish, but it would prove much different than his initial expectation.

At the urging of his mother, Rye learned Swahili, and the language served him well as he traveled to Nairobi during a break between college and his officer training. Rye landed in Kibera, a tragic wasteland of slums fueled by the global trend of Third World urbanization. Rye immerses himself in the urban culture. He wears civilian clothes, picks up the slang of the street, eats the food and lives the same conditions of the people around him. This echoes the "by, with,

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and through” credo practiced by the U.S. Army Special Forces. Over time, Rye befriends Tabitha Atieno Festo and Salim Mohamed. Tabitha, a trained nurse, longs to make enough cash selling vegetables to build a local medical clinic for Kibera. Salim is a soccer coach who recruits children to his teams to protect them from street violence and corruption. Rye lends \$26 to Tabitha to help get her started at the local markets and heads back to school. Later, while studying, Rye decides to combine Tabitha and Salim’s efforts into an official non-governmental organization. From these humble beginnings, an idea began that would become Carolina for Kibera.

After graduating from North Carolina and accepting a Marine Corps commission, Rye’s journey takes an unexpected twist when two planes crash into New York’s World Trade Center. He wants to serve on the frontlines in Iraq and Afghanistan, but he’s sent to Bosnia and Djibouti. In his new craft of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) against terror networks, Rye practices the black arts of target selection, raids to kill or capture enemies, and tactical interrogation.

Eventually, Rye is called to Iraq to help control Fallujah from 2005 through 2006. The Marines attempted to quell the burgeoning civil war through strict population control measures, disruption of the enemy’s support networks and infrastructure, and psychological warfare operations designed to woo the local populace to side with the new Iraqi government. Rye says that his “combat experiences were nowhere near as intense, tragic, and terrifying as others.” The reader is left to wonder if his views would have changed given another couple of tours as a company commander instead of a regimental staff officer. Rye insists that his experiences in Anbar “allowed (him) to glimpse into the abyss and its seductive, slippery slope” acknowledging a feeling of bloodlust and a need to kill in the face of evil and imminent danger. While his description is quite accurate, this points to the key difference between professional soldiers and warriors. Professional soldiers learn to control their emotions and make decisions based off the mission, not the emotion.

After Iraq, Rye leaves the Corps and heads to Harvard to study business. He graduates with an advanced degree, gets a job at Duke Energy, weds his longtime girlfriend, and fathers a daughter, a semblance of a normal life that he once refused. Rye continued to nurture his charity, which becomes a non-governmental organization. Today, Tabitha’s clinic helps thousands of the sick, and Salim’s soccer league serves as a mediator between competing tribal and ethnic factions.

Will CFK succeed? Honestly, I don’t know. It remains a work in progress. If its power expands throughout the community, then the organization’s growing influence likely will begin to threaten neighborhood leaders, tribal chiefs and criminal bosses. I am left wondering who will secure the organization’s offices and projects if the violence escalates.

Ultimately, if the means are the ends in the making, then we must continue to ask if there are better ways and Rye provides one very good example. After nearly a decade into the "Long War" of endless foreign military interventions, it might be time to listen to the caution of Rye’s mother, “You need to slow down. You need time to think. Go slow.”

A similar request was made centuries ago by Archidamus, the Spartan King, “I have not lived so long, Spartans, without having had the experience of many wars, and I see those among you of the same age as myself, who will not fall into the common misfortune of longing for war from inexperience or from a belief in its advantage and its safety. This, the war on which you are now debating, would be one of the greatest magnitude, on a sober consideration of the matter.”

Sparta won that war, but lost the peace because the nation lost sight of what it meant to be Spartan. Rye seems to be reinterpreting what it means to be an American hero. Is it time to consider his voice?²

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² Robert B. Strassler and Victor Davis Hanson. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*