Book Review: The Junior Officers Reading Club: Killing Time and Fighting Wars

Reviewed by Michael Gates

After nearly nine years of conflict, the grandchildren of the “Greatest Generation” have earned the right to tell their story from the frontlines of the Long War. This generation of junior officers and soldiers from more than forty countries has experienced persistent conflict, irregular threats, and unpredictable futures. Combat tours have not ended in victory parades, but in training to prepare for the next scheduled deployment. Numerous contemporary authors have struggled to articulate the experiences of this new generation of warriors; however, former British Grenadier Guards Captain Patrick Hennessey has definitively captured the voice of the newest generation of veterans. Hennessey’s remarkable memoir, The Junior Officer’s Reading Club: Killing Time and Fighting Wars, is likely to stand the test of time as a brilliant and cathartic perspective from one of the young leaders of the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond. If you are looking for classical and polished prose you will not find it here; this book does well by keeping the rugged structure and tone of the conflicts that served as its’ inspiration. The language is brilliantly gritty and harsh, yet this work exquisitely frames the true essence of the experiences, realities, and wisdom of the young Digital Age veterans fighting in distant corners of the world.

Hennessey’s solid contribution to the history of contemporary conflict demonstrates how interconnected the modern world has become as nations have partnered to counter common threats. This firsthand account of a young officer bouncing between conflicts could easily represent the story of a young soldier from any of the coalition partners serving in contingency operations around the world. The individual events of this narrative only serve a secondary role to frame the most important aspect of this memoir, the evolution and maturation of a modern soldier forced to grow wise beyond his years in the complex and uncertain environments of modern conflict. Hennessey’s combat chronology traces the history of modern coalition warfare from the relative simplicity of Balkan peacekeeping missions, to the stark intricacies of Iraq and Afghanistan. The detailed accounts vividly describe his four year journey from an optimistic Sandhurst cadet, boredom as a lieutenant during deployments to Bosnia and Iraq, and his christening under fire in Afghanistan as the “youngest captain in the army.”

In the opening pages of his book Hennessey describes his formative early development, seeking to live up to the legacies of his grandfathers. One was a career military officer and veteran of the Normandy invasion, the other a respected college professor. This contrast foreshadowed his later internal conflict as he weighed volunteering his service at a time of war against his academic and occupational pursuits. Hennessey’s decision to join the military was motivated by shock evoked from the 9/11 attacks, boredom of civilian life, and a desire to tackle student debt. His early expectations of military service and combat were framed by Vietnam War movies and the tales of his relatives and neighbors from World War II, the Falkland Islands,
and Desert Storm. During his training at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, Hennessey bristled with frustration over cadet training in conventional tactics, instead of the “three-block war” and irregular threats he expected to confront. Following Hennessey’s graduation and commissioning as an infantry officer in the Grenadier Guards, he conducted a brief deployment to Bosnia in late 2004. Hennessey characterized this deployment as “the perfect blend of operational realism to sharpen professional skills without anyone seriously thinking that everyone might not come home.”

Following the Bosnia deployment, Hennessey and the Grenadier Guards bristle in anticipation with the news of a battalion deployment to Iraq in the ongoing conflict and expanding insurgency. The expectations of the deployment were muted by lackluster pre-mission training focused on peacekeeping operations, tactics employed in Northern Ireland, and the persistent shadow of Falkland Islands vignettes. The Iraq deployment left Hennessey frustrated and bored running a British detention facility and prompting the creation of the book’s namesake “Junior Officer’s Reading Club.” Discussions of works like Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* and Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* were punctuated by sounds of combat in the far distance, further emphasizing the tedium and perceived shame of being assigned a supporting role in the war. Hennessey unabashedly recounts his unit’s frustrations of missing the glory and excitement of direct combat operations. This portion of the book beautifully captures the eagerness and naivety of a junior officer who has never experienced the true horrors of combat. Hennessey next finds his unit back at the Grenadier Guards’ barracks in London performing ceremonial guard duties, embarrassed for his failure to be involved in “real combat,” and anxious for a chance to prove himself in future deployments.

Hennessey’s wishes are realized when his unit is sent to Helmand, Afghanistan in 2007. In this remarkable portion of this book Hennessey candidly describes his own transformation as a soldier and leader during his Afghanistan deployment. Through detailed accounts of intense combat, numbing casualties, and a mixture of frustrations and admiration for his Afghan National Army comrades, the reader witnesses the maturation of an officer witnessing the human toll of war. In this section Hennessey is most effective at truly describing the dualities of modern conflict. Excerpts range from descriptions of the excesses of Kandahar Airfield food concessions, the primitive combat outpost of his fearless Afghan comrades, the impact of devastating casualties within his unit, and whether his element was achieving any long term gains. Captain Hennessey may have entered Afghanistan an eager young officer searching for adventure and glory, but returned to ceremonial duty in London a man hardened and mature beyond his years. Upon his return, Hennessey realizes he has grown increasingly distant from the civilian world during his participation in several “small wars.” His dispatches poignantly describe the difficulties of his reintegration, and his debate of whether the progress made abroad was worth the heavy human toll he witnessed. Hennessy ends his Afghan account with a brilliant, yet ominous quote from the local Afghan Army commander; “They sicken of the calm, who knew the storm.” This prophetic wisdom foreshadowed Hennessey’s candid self introspection, as a young man making sense of his recent experiences and debating difficult decisions involving his future military service, and ultimately why he left.

Patrick Hennessey’s great contribution to his generation of young officers and soldiers is his frank and open self-dialogue illustrating the complex web of frustrations, pride, and honor of coalition soldiers serving on the front lines of the Long War. This work realistically captures the experiences and emotions that have shaped the perspectives of modern soldiers, balancing
constant communication with loved ones with stark realities of combat thousands of miles away. These men and women share bonds that defy international boundaries and language barriers. Veterans of these conflicts will recognize the authenticity in Hennessey’s account, while other readers will gain great insight into the conflicts that have shaped the perspectives of today’s citizen soldiers and tomorrow’s political and societal leaders.


*Major Michael Gates is currently assigned to the Defense Analysis Department, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. He was commissioned a U.S. Army officer in 2000, with subsequent service in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan.*