



One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War

By Bing West

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Reviewed by CPT Jake Miraldi

Bing West's latest book, *One Million Steps*, continues his unique and prolific reporting on the wars of the last decade. Over the course of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, West has been a constant presence. In Iraq, he lived and patrolled with Marines in Fallujah. In Afghanistan, he chronicled Army and Marine operations in support of the 2009-2010 surge. In *One Million Steps*, West embeds with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines — specifically 3rd Platoon, Kilo Company — which is isolated in a small combat outpost amidst the sweltering farm fields of Sangin District of Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan.

The platoon is asked to accomplish an extremely difficult and often nebulous mission which West chronicles through the daily struggles of the Marines, numerous fire fights, and “ground-level” treatment of the failings of counterinsurgency. What has always stood out most about West's reporting across his various works is not only his intimate understanding of Infantry Soldiers and Marines, but also his personal willingness to step out with them, to endure the hardships and dangers they face, and to report their struggles and triumphs with compassion and a knowing empathy. *One Million Steps* is no different. It is an ode to Marines and the young men who are willing to volunteer for hardships that most will never experience. He revels in the bonds forged between the Marines of 3/5 and throughout the narrative links those bonds through the history of the Marines to World War II and Vietnam. West paints a vibrant picture of the young men who serve in the Infantry. Brave, stubborn, gregarious, his narrative shows young men at war doing the same things young men at war have always done. Through his own personal observation on patrol and at 3rd Platoon's base, West is able to lovingly describe these Marines in a way that only someone who has experienced war in much the same way possibly could. *One Million Steps* continues the trend of West's other books where the characterization of the men shines throughout. For the tactical Infantry leader, the narrative provides not only a ground-level view of small-scale, low-intensity conflict, but more importantly can teach young leaders something about the nature of men engaged in the constant stress of combat and help prepare, even the uninitiated, for those realities.

But while *One Million Steps* heaps praise on individual Marines and junior leaders, it also places in doubt much of the thinking of senior commanders. Throughout the book, West discusses the failure of leaders to develop a long-term strategy and decries “civics lesson” counterinsurgency. West feels so strongly about the lack of leadership from higher echelons and the futility of current counterinsurgency doctrine that he cannot help but intersperse critiques as asides throughout the 3rd Platoon narrative. He also

takes high-level commanders to task for their confused and contradictory messages to Soldiers and Marines about what the mission in Afghanistan was and what its goals were.

West's connection between the leadership and strategic failures of policy makers and the hard work and suffering of 3rd Platoon's mission is heartbreaking. Through 3rd Platoon's daily grind of patrolling, we see the end result of unclear or wrongheaded policy. The sacrifices made by 3rd Platoon were not wedded to a coherent end state and thus, in West's words, "There would be no winning or defeating of the enemy. All 3rd Platoon could do was slug it out, day after day." If there is one central theme in *One Million Steps*, it is the juxtaposition of young Marines, doing the very best they can with the orders given to them, fighting it out day after day, and policy makers and generals dithering about timelines and methods without developing a fully formed strategy. To West, that is the tragedy of the war in Afghanistan.

One Million Steps is West's final discussion of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The courage it chronicles and the missteps it casts light upon conclude West's outstanding reporting on the wars of the last decade, the totality of which stands as an important record of the successes and failures of the armed forces during that time. *One Million Steps*, when taken with West's other books, encompasses a body of work that should be reviewed carefully by military leaders of all levels and should influence decision makers in the future.