



The Snake Eaters: Counterinsurgency Advisors in Combat

Owen West

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WHEN A DOZEN UNPREPARED AMERICAN ARMY RESERVISTS ARE DROPPED OFF on an isolated Iraqi outpost with orders to be its military advisors, they have no idea that what they will really be doing is fighting. With no training to fall back on, this group—including a guitarist, a DEA agent, a plumber, and a postal worker—must somehow mentor the “Snake Eaters,” an Iraqi battalion locked in a deadly struggle over an insurgent-infested town along the Euphrates River. They are plunged into complex counterinsurgent warfare side by side with their Iraqi charges, soon discovering that at such close quarters moral standards are inevitably blurred. The battle becomes so personal that the combatants know each other’s names, faces, and especially the families caught in the middle.

Owen West, a third-generation U.S. Marine, tells the gripping, boots-on-the-ground story of the remarkable American and Iraqi troops who for two years fought the insurgency street by street and house by house in the poisonous city of Khalidiya, Iraq. The American advisors were a ramshackle group of Army reservists, Marines, and National Guardsmen with little support or understanding from the higher ranks. The Iraqi battalion they were assigned was from the very first both amateurish and hostile. In a town where the people they were trying to protect were indistinguishable from the enemy they were trying to kill—and few locals ever told the truth—it seemed like a mission doomed to failure.

But with courage, infinite patience, and a sense of duty few outsiders understood, the young American and Iraqi soldiers on patrol learned to work with each other and with the townspeople, winning their trust and revealing war as a series of human acts. From Major Mohammed, the Snake Eater who garners the most respect from the Americans precisely because he likes them the least, to the bighearted Staff Sergeant Blakley, a medic stalked by a sniper, the heroic soldiers in these pages are as complex as their war.

By the end of the mission, the Snake Eaters was the first Iraqi battalion granted independent battle space, the insurgency was wiped off the streets of Khalidiya, and peace was restored. A rare success story to emerge from the war, West’s exceptional book is as instructive as it is impossible to put down.

Owen West is donating his net proceeds from *The Snake Eaters* to the Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation and to the families of fallen advisors and fallen Iraqi “Snake Eaters.”

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