

Book Review

The Unforgiving Minute

“The Unforgiving Minute” is former United States Army Capt. Craig M. Mullaney’s brisk, candid memoir about his education as a soldier. He learned different lessons in different places. As a cadet at West Point he learned to be dutiful, punctilious and unerringly accurate, even about the military method of folding underwear. At Ranger School he learned how to navigate difficult physical terrain and endure grueling tests of mettle. At Oxford, as a Rhodes scholar, he had a teacher who advised: “Read and think. Simultaneously if possible.” At home he thought he had learned how to make his father proud — until that father walked out and never came back.

As a reader he learned from writers as diverse as T. E. Lawrence, Rudyard Kipling (from whose poem “If” this book takes its title), Jane Austen and Thucydides. As a traveler he vacationed with buddies, partied heartily and learned that the world is very large. And as an American he was in New Zealand on Sept. 11, 2001, when someone asked if he had seen the news and said, “I’m so sorry.” At that point every lesson absorbed by this soldier in training suddenly took on different meaning.

“The Unforgiving Minute” is Captain Mullaney’s attempt to reconcile the precombat lessons that seemed so clear to him with the exigencies of battlefield experience. He makes it clear that this is no easy process. At one point Captain Mullaney, who led a platoon in Afghanistan and later became a teacher at

the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., explains how he told his students about the most difficult battlefield experience of his career. To do that, he writes, he had to give two different accounts of the fighting at Losano Ridge, which occurred in Afghanistan in 2003, very close to the Pakistan border.

First he gave his students the straightforward version. He described the basics, like “movement to contact, suppressive fire and medical evacuation.” But that version did not do justice to the “chaos, noise, fear, exhilaration.” So he retold the story from a different perspective. “This time I tried to put them under my helmet,” he writes about trying to convey the full experience of battle. He is honest enough to acknowledge that he cannot be sure that the decisions he made under fire — in that minute to which the book’s title refers — were right.

“The Unforgiving Minute” effectively contrasts the before and after aspects of one officer’s combat career. It conveys his fervent sense of responsibility for the men he led. At West Point, he says, even a loose belt buckle or an undone shoelace could bring on the worst words imaginable: “You just killed your platoon.”

Inhabiting the student’s hypothetical realm he never learned that the blood-slicked body of a wounded man might slip off a stretcher. He never wondered

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about “the number of minutes you could expect to shoot a machine gun before its barrel melted.”

The jacket of “The Unforgiving Minute” identifies Captain Mullaney as “a member of the Obama-Biden Transition Project.” He expresses some criticism of the Bush administration’s strategy in Afghanistan, but this book’s emphasis is on neither policy nor politics.

It is one man’s story, warmly and credibly told, and its focus is on the idealism that he brought to military service. In Captain Mullaney’s mind there is no contradiction between loyally following orders and intelligently wondering what purpose those orders serve.

“The Unforgiving Minute” is divided into sections, each with a distinct tone. The “Student” part of the book is the most familiar, what with its fond memories of punishing college episodes. (The first time he accepted an upperclassman’s offer to “hang out,” Captain Mullaney says, he found himself “suspended on two elbows from the doors of an open wardrobe.”)

He goes on to describe the mentors who helped him become a Rhodes scholar, including the one who taught him the difference between houndstooth and herringbone jackets. Throughout this account he never forgets what it took for a working-class kid to have such golden opportunities and good fortune.

At Oxford he met his wife to be, a woman raised in New Jersey by a family of Indian descent. Her father’s fondness for Tom Clancy novels went a long way toward convincing her parents that a military man might make a good son-in-law. But he also describes family members’ post-9/11 worries about his future.

“It didn’t occur to me that it was unusual for a 24-year-old to have a notarized will and a life insurance policy,” he writes about preparing for his tour of duty. “I checked the box for maximum coverage.”

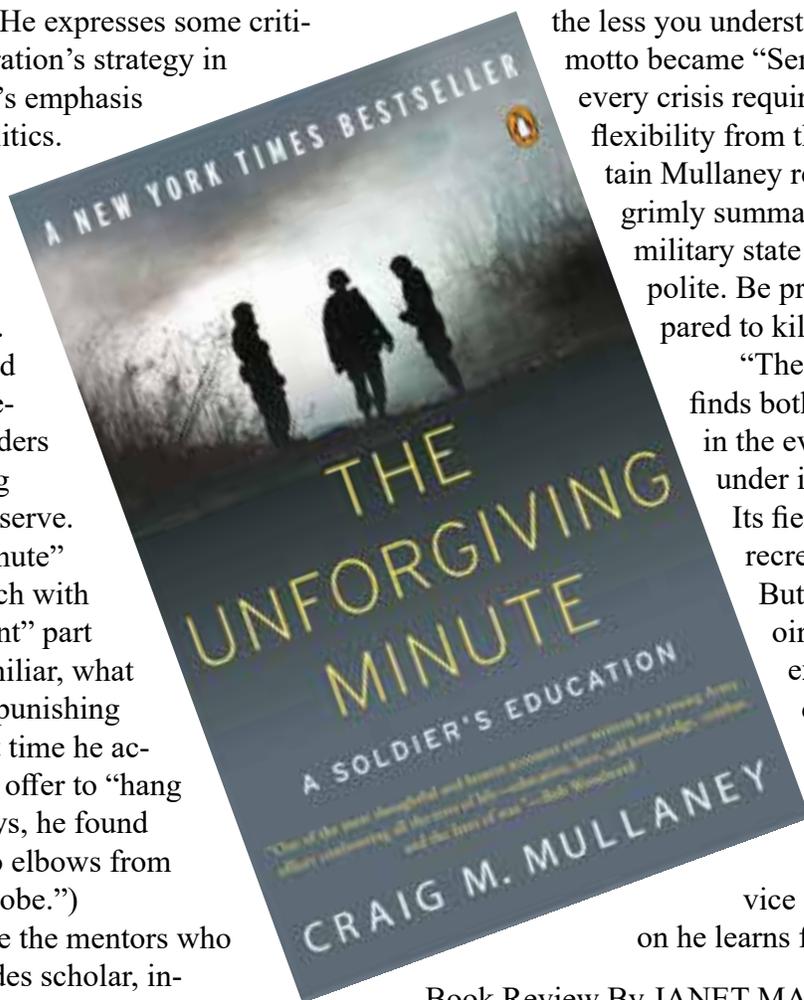
The book’s “Soldier” section is as abruptly different on the page as Captain Mullaney’s wartime experience must have been in life. The first rule of Afghanistan, he says, was this: “The closer you look, the less you understand.” One sergeant’s motto became “Semper Gumby” because every crisis required a new kind of flexibility from the troops. And Captain Mullaney repeats a warning that grimly summarized the American military state of mind there: “Be polite. Be professional. Be prepared to kill everyone you meet.”

“The Unforgiving Minute” finds both suspense and pathos in the events that took place under its author’s command.

Its fierce climactic battle is recreated in searing detail.

But what gives this memoir its impact isn’t the external events that it describes. It’s the inner journey of a man who is at first eager to learn as much as he can from service and scholarship. Later

on he learns from his mistakes.



Book Review By JANET MASLIN

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