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## The Chosen Few: A Company of Paratroopers and Its Heroic Struggle to Survive in the Mountains of Afghanistan

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### READERS: HERE ARE THE CHOSEN FEW—INCLUDING *THE CHOSEN FEW*

*The Chosen Few: A Company of Paratroopers and Its Heroic Struggle to Survive in the Mountains of Afghanistan*, by Gregg Zoroya. Boston: Da Capo, 2017. 370 pages. \$27.

Gregg Zoroya chronicles the journey of the paratroopers of C Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd Airborne Brigade—known as “the Chosen Few”—as they deployed to combat in Afghanistan and fought in some of the most violent and bloody battles during 2007 and 2008. In his foreword, Admiral William McRaven, USN (Ret.), highlights that during the fifteen-month deployment, nearly two-thirds of the soldiers among the Chosen Few were injured and awarded the Purple Heart. Eventually, two of them, Specialist Kyle J. White and Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts, would receive the Medal of Honor for their heroism and bravery in close combat with the enemy.

Initially, Zoroya describes the soldiers’ backgrounds and how they came together at Fort Benning, Georgia, and later in Vicenza, Italy. The soldiers of the Chosen Few were a reflection of contemporary working-class America. They joined the Army in search of a better life and better opportunities for the future. The Army provided them with structure, a full-time job, and much more. “A large number of ‘the Chosen Few’ came from broken homes and

arrived in the Army without a father figure, or at least none who had been around full-time. Some were like lost boys searching without realizing it for a surrogate family after a childhood of abuse or neglect.” Joining the Army was about being a part of something bigger than themselves—a first for many of them—with their buddies eventually becoming their second family.

Zoroya does a superb job highlighting the nuances of the soldiers’ personalities, their relationships with one another, and how they came to meld together. He traces the lighthearted moments as well as the gruesome details these soldiers faced as they fought against overwhelming odds at the Ranch House command post, on the cliffs of the Waigal valley, and again at the battle of Wanat. Zoroya conducted countless interviews with soldiers, family members, and others to bring the details of each fight to life so that readers feel as if they were actually there. But this is more than just an account of one unit’s combat actions; the reader also feels the camaraderie, love, and respect these soldiers shared—they were willing to fight and even die for one another.

The resiliency, dedication, and mental toughness that the Chosen Few soldiers displayed, even though medevac assets and air support were lacking, are commendable. At Wanat, they were on their own in enemy territory and outnumbered by enemy insurgents just meters outside their fighting positions. Yet they continued to fight, looking out for one another in a way that only those in close combat can understand. In combat, soldiers fight for one another more than anything else—they do not want to let their buddies down.

The book raises the question: How can the world's most powerful military put soldiers in harm's way with only limited resources and support? Lieutenant Colonel Bill Ostlund, battalion commander of the 2/503 Infantry, noted that the entire "brigade had six Apache attack helicopters, and at times as many as four were down for maintenance. It was taking way too long to get the wounded off the battlefield." Wanat was a travesty, not just another bureaucratic oversight; the U.S. military establishment clearly was surprised and could not react quickly enough.

The July 2008 battle of Wanat itself was horrific, and the fallout devastating for all. Those who survived were tormented by guilt, wondering what more they could have done. The Army, for its part, conducted several investigations, released the findings, and then amended the findings. Careers were ruined, and some leaders left the Army. Even more tragic, families lost faith in the chain of command and the Army leadership, because it seemed that no one was held accountable for the circumstances surrounding and the casualties resulting from the battle of Wanat.

There are important lessons to be learned from reading about these brave soldiers of the Chosen Few. Zoroya makes the following point: "Just as military teachers for decades strolled with students across the battlefields at Gettysburg, Shiloh, and other famous engagements to learn the art of war, they [should] also virtually tour Wanat in the years ahead." These are lessons that should not have to be relearned each time U.S. forces engage in combat operations, and that is why the battle of Wanat will be studied by young men and women at the U.S. Military Academy and in college Reserve Officers' Training Corps (i.e., ROTC) detachments across the United States for years to come. Zoroya has done a masterful job of highlighting the brave soldiers of the Chosen Few. This book is a must-read for military leaders at any level.

THOMAS J. GIBBONS



*No Room for Mistakes: British and Allied Submarine Warfare 1939–1940*, by Geirr H. Haarr. Barnsley, U.K.: Seaforth, 2015. 450 pages. \$49.95.

*No Room for Mistakes* is a meticulously researched and well-written history of the British and Allied submarine services from 1939 to 1940. The relatively short time span the book covers allows the author, Geirr Haarr, to delve into granular detail, often giving week-by-week, even day-by-day, accounts of particular submarines and their travails fighting the German navy in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean.

The book's first chapter follows the tragic story of HMS *Thetis* during the first half of 1939. Shortly after it left the Cammell Laird shipyards near