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And the Whole Mountain Burned

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And the Whole Mountain Burned, by Ray McPadden. New York: Center Street, 2018. 288 pages. \$26.

And the Whole Mountain Burned is a well-written novel that chronicles the exploits of Army private Danny Shane on his first combat tour, in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. It is no wonder that Ray McPadden won the 2019 W. Y. Boyd Literary Award for Excellence in Military Fiction for this work. The book is a patchwork quilt of the highs and lows that American forces in combat face every day, including intense pressure, uncertainty, and even boredom. Although it is fiction, it is a poignant reminder of the traumas and tragedies of war.

The novel starts with a flashback by Sergeant Nick Burch, Shane's squad leader and mentor. Burch remembers a young Afghan boy making *chipas*, or french fries, to sell to American soldiers—in the midst of a horrific firefight with enemy insurgents. Burch sees the young boy, nicknamed Sadboy, years later when he is conducting a raid with Shane and other members of his squad. During the raid, the American soldiers kill Sadboy's father and apprehend his mother. Extremely distraught, Sadboy eventually joins the insurgents because the American soldiers brutalized his family. Sadboy's character haunts Burch throughout the story.

McPadden does a great job showcasing the different relationships and emotions that Shane experiences during his time in Afghanistan. His compassion for a young, disabled Afghan boy who cannot take care of himself is heartwarming, as Shane gives the boy food and tries to

help him when other Afghan children bully him. Eventually, however, Shane is forced to shoot the boy because he participated in an ambush. Shane also befriends the platoon's physically handicapped Afghan interpreter, Billy, and helps him get money for an eye operation. Shane's long-distance relationship with his girlfriend, Candy, is complicated. She is a stripper and Shane gives her access to his bank account and sends her money. She subsequently leaves him, empties the bank account, and destroys their apartment. This is a colorful aspect of the book, but an accurate reminder to readers that those who serve the nation in combat face domestic, as well as combat and deployment, challenges.

Burch's character also is complex, and Shane's relationship with his sergeant is one of the consistent themes throughout the book. Initially, Shane looks up to Burch as a mentor and seeks his approval; however, eventually he sees the impact of prolonged combat in the form of Burch's changed attitude, as well as his impaired judgment as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder. Even while home on leave Burch is not himself; he thinks continuously about the war and his squad in Afghanistan, he cannot relax, and he is haunted by demons and dreams of war. Burch is relieved to return to Afghanistan and finally get back to the fight with his troops.

Shane's relationship with local villagers is also a common theme. The villagers depend on selling timber from the surrounding forests for their livelihood. While searching for insurgents in the forests, Burch's squad gets ambushed; as the battle progresses, Burch calls for white phosphorous artillery rounds to kill the enemy. The trees burn. "The fire followed a ridgeline, and before

long the whole mountain burned” (p. 247). Not surprisingly, the fire upsets the locals, and the insurgents use that unhappiness to garner increased support to attack the American camp.

On the squad’s final mission, when the unit is taking fire from multiple enemy positions, Shane is shocked when Burch calls in an A-10 attack on his own position. Shane tries to save his squad leader but is killed in the process, while Burch survives the firestorm. Although saddened by Shane’s death, it is in this instant that Burch realizes that the insurgents never will quit, and the carnage will continue.

McPadden’s rendition of the plight of American infantrymen in Afghanistan, as well as his description of the terrain and life on patrol, are so realistic that the reader feels he actually is there. The

reader easily sees and feels what Private Shane experiences while humping patrols in mountainous terrain and treacherous weather conditions. Shane and his squad accomplish objectives and hold terrain, only to see it occupied by enemy forces shortly after they depart for their base camp.

More than a story, the book highlights the personal challenges of combat and the range of emotions experienced before and after combat by many who serve their nation. This is a classic war novel and a must-read for those who want to get a firsthand account of combat on the ground in Afghanistan. McPadden’s recent combat experience as an Army Ranger gives his writing instant credibility.

THOMAS J. GIBBONS

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