

## The Hero Code: Lessons Learned from Lives Well Lived

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### Recommended Citation

Cauble, Scott and McRaven, William H. () "The Hero Code: Lessons Learned from Lives Well Lived," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 75: No. 1, Article 19.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss1/19>

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1931 or 1937 as the war's inception. That small controversy aside, *Tower of Skulls* is a fount of facts and insights. It also is compulsively readable, despite being a doorstop of a book. Several insights in particular resonated with me. To name one, the author draws out the world-historical significance of the Sino-Japanese War. He lays great weight on the Marco Polo Bridge incident (1937), contending (pp. 6–7) that the fracas “immediately initiated a train of events ending with the dissolution of the Asian empires of Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, and France.” Other results included a divided Korea, the Communist takeover of China, enmity across the Taiwan Strait, and long-lasting American military hegemony in the Pacific.

In short, the Asia-Pacific War upended the Asian system the way World War I upended the European system—and helped give rise to the world we know today. Frank's verdict is reminiscent of Pankaj Mishra's conclusion (in *From the Ruins of Empire*) that the Battle of Tsushima (1905) delivered an elegy for Western imperialism by showing that Asians could defeat Europeans in triumphant fashion. Tsushima, says Mishra, roused dispossessed peoples, setting nationalist and liberationist movements aflame across the globe. Such bracing findings stay with readers.

Frank admirably demonstrates how the Japanese war in China precipitated U.S. involvement in the Asia-Pacific War. The “Japanese occupation of vast Chinese territories since 1937 was the great divide” between the island empire and America. By 1941, the author adds, “China not only served as a critical ally for the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands in the Asian-Pacific region” but “it figured

functionally as an indispensable ally of the Soviet Union.” Throughout the period of mounting tensions, accordingly, President Franklin D. Roosevelt “remained highly alert to the fate of China” (pp. 224–26) and involved himself intimately in negotiations with Tokyo meant to restrain Japanese adventurism.

To me, though, the most striking revelation in *Tower of Skulls* is just how deep Japanese civil-military dysfunction ran. Military influence over politics, sometimes to the extent of outright insubordination, was a recurring theme throughout the Asia-Pacific conflict. After the fall of France in 1940, for instance, Imperial Japanese Army chieftains cast covetous eyes on French Indochina. After French and Japanese diplomats reached a satisfactory accommodation, officers on the Army General Staff in Tokyo and the Twenty-Second Army and 5th Division in China “launched Japanese troops in an armed onslaught” into Indochina that September. Army officers evinced a “flagrant refusal to obey lawful orders” (pp. 146–47), and thereby shaped the conflict to Japan's eventual detriment. Such is the fallout when the military, which should be a tool of policy, subverts policy for its own perceived ends.

Read the whole thing. Strongly recommended.

JAMES R. HOLMES



*The Hero Code: Lessons Learned from Lives Well Lived*, by William H. McRaven. New York: Grand Central, 2021. 157 pages. \$22.

Admiral McRaven (USN, Ret.), author of the *New York Times* best seller *Make Your Bed*, has produced another

well-written, enjoyable, and insightful read. As it is a book on the importance of character, it shares some similarities with Admiral James Stavridis's *Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character*. The main difference between the two books is where the authors find inspiration. Where Stavridis looks to the admiralty for examples of exemplary character, McRaven looks to people from all walks of life with whom he served in his long and illustrious career as a Navy SEAL, combatant commander, and chancellor of the University of Texas.

The author begins by providing the reader with a windshield tour of his own development regarding heroic character. To McRaven as an eight-year-old, Superman embodied what it meant to be a hero. McRaven's epiphany moment came on a trip to New York City, where he came to understand that it was not Superman but policemen who were the real heroes. As an adolescent, his heroes became those whom he believed were in a special class—professionals such as astronauts, physicians, sports figures, and military personnel—because they were smarter, stronger, and braver than the rest of us. But as he matured and began his own military journey, he came to realize that not only are there heroes everywhere but, most significantly, there is hero potential in each of us. The hero code, he argues, is “a learned experience” that is developed by taking small steps “that eventually become the foundation of our character” (p. xv).

Each of the ten chapters provides a story from the author's life that illustrates a particular character trait. He leads us into the PT [physical training] Circle on the Grinder in Coronado, California, on his first day of Navy SEAL training, where he first learns the military value

of having a sense of humor. At other times, we walk with him through the passageways of the Pentagon, where he receives life lessons on integrity and its one-for-one correlation with trust. He also introduces us to young military professionals such as Airman Jackson, who, while standing her post on the flight line in Afghanistan, and despite overwhelming pressure from superiors, demonstrates the importance of fulfilling one's duty by carrying out General Order Number One.

Some of my favorite chapters, though, depict McRaven's interactions later in life with those not in uniform. One of these is the story of a fascinating man named Charlie whom the author meets for the first time at a dinner party. The author describes how Charlie, although a man in his eighties with a lifetime of stories to tell, was reluctant to talk about himself. “[Charlie] was much more interested in me and my family. He wanted to know all about my son in the Air Force and my other two children.” McRaven continues, “By the time dessert arrived, I felt like we were good friends. His quiet confidence, gentle nature, and genuine interest in me and my family built an instant rapport that often takes years to develop. He smiled often, laughed with ease, and was so very gracious to everyone at the table” (p. 20). After the dinner was over, the author discovered that Charlie, the man who was reluctant to talk about himself, actually was General Charles Duke, whose résumé includes such extraordinary feats as serving as the mission commander for Apollo 11 (the first moon landing), working in the simulator to enable the safe return of astronauts from the ill-fated Apollo 13, and being the youngest man ever to walk on the moon. But it is not for these

successes that the author tells us the story of Charlie; instead, McRaven is impressed by the man's humility and its effect on those around him. He concludes the chapter with the observation: "The power of humility is that it brings us closer together and the role of every hero is to unite people, not divide them" (p. 25).

While I enjoyed and appreciated each of the stories of heroic character told in a lighthearted and conversational manner, the great strength of the book is in the author's encouragement to activate the heroic character that is within reach for every person. He encourages the reader to do one thing in the right direction today, and he believes that the confidence to take the next step will follow. Regardless of whether you feel yourself to be courageous, he says, "Take just one step forward. *Just one*" (p. 13). If our goal is to instill hope in others, he says, "Find out what you're good at and give it to others" (p. 115). If we want to lighten the burden on others around us, he writes, "Find your comedic voice and use your wit to save those around you, to free them from their sorrow, to give them joy, and to help them see the humor in the darkest of times" (p. 132). McRaven contends that self-reflection followed by small, incremental steps is the key to the heroic life.

This is an ideal book for leaders of all ranks. Senior leaders will appreciate the wisdom and insight the author has accrued throughout his career, but they also will be inspired to be on the lookout for heroic virtues in their subordinates. Small-unit leaders will find these stories memorable and easy to share with those they supervise. The hopeful tone of the book will encourage leaders who may spend an inordinate amount of time dealing with character defects in others to focus on helping them develop heroic

character. Finally, all will be challenged to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses and seek out others whose lives are marked by the hero code.

SCOTT CAUBLE



*The Cambridge History of Warfare*, ed. Geoffrey Parker. 2nd ed. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2020. 608 pages. \$99.99.

Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, the Prusso-German general Friedrich von Bernhardi (1849–1930) published his best-selling *Deutschland und der nächste Krieg* (1911). Bernhardi, the long-serving military historian of the German General Staff, understood war to be something far more elemental than Clausewitz's famous "continuation of politics by other means." Drawing on fin de siècle social Darwinist and ethno-nationalist thought, Bernhardi argued that war facilitated human development. War provided an opportunity to rejuvenate the nation, the society, and the race. This was an ancient notion, as Bernhardi acknowledged by drawing on the writings of Heraclitus of Ephesus: "[W]ar is the father of all things. The sages of antiquity long before Darwin recognized this" (Bernhardi, *Deutschland und der nächste Krieg*, pp. 11–12). In Bernhardi's view, the development of a society occurred within the forge of war—it created the necessity to evolve or go extinct. The manner in which a society prosecutes war is, likewise, a representation of that society. War, like politics, is both a reflection of and a response to the form and function of its governing society.

It is this dynamic that the contributors to the second edition of *The Cambridge*