

**RED PLATOON: A TRUE STORY  
OF AMERICAN VALOR**  
(CLINTON ROMESHA)

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Americans have always liked fighting stories: autobiographical and third person, fictional and non-fictional. From dime novels about outlaws and Indians to, more recently, war movies, Americans have vicariously enjoyed American combat, and American successes in combat. There are even meta fighting stories: an organizing frame of Clint Eastwood's movie *Unforgiven* is a biographer trailing Eastwood's character to write a dime novel. As far as the recent Afghanistan and Iraq wars, early movies (i.e., under Bush) were mostly high-profile flops attacking America (*Rendition*; *Lions for Lambs*). Later movies (i.e., under Obama, where it was no longer regarded as necessary by those controlling the film industry to attack Bush rather than make profits) included some such, but moved toward depicting American heroism (*Lone Survivor*; *American Sniper*). Not incidentally, those two latter movies were based on autobiographical books, rather than the fever dreams of Hollywood leftists, and this book, Clinton Romesha's *Red Platoon*, falls squarely into that genre.

In 2009, Romesha was an Army staff sergeant, in a cavalry troop (Bravo "Black Knight" Troop) fighting in Iraq, then Afghanistan, that was part of a combat brigade in the Army's 4th Infantry Division. His platoon was one of three in the troop, creatively named Red, White, and Blue. For those not overly familiar with military structure, like me, Romesha very helpfully provides a breakdown of Red Platoon's members and ranks, as well as the officers who commanded the other platoons, and their collective superior officers. Although the highest officer actually present during the battle the book describes was a first lieutenant, higher-ranking officers played an important remote support role. This breakdown is also a handy reference point to keep straight who is who, which is very helpful during reading, though the book lacks an index, which is a significant defect. In general the book is tightly written, probably due to a ghostwriter who is barely credited.

Romesha first introduces most of the eighteen members of his platoon, drawing detailed pictures of several of them, namely his friends and some others who figure prominently in the action of the book.

Romesha notes early on that, contrary to the common civilian perception, platoon-size groups of military men (this being real combat, there are obviously no women here, or mentioned in the book) are not welded together, but rather have the usual dislikes and likes among themselves, and the usual hierarchy of dominance, outside formal ranks, that characterize all groups of men. Here, that hierarchy is based primarily on perceived courage and fighting spirit, although as I discuss below, it is not at all clear that Romesha is presenting a true picture of these men.

Then we jump into the action. This battle, the Battle of Kamdesh (its official name, though Romesha never uses it), took place in northeast Afghanistan, near the Pakistani border, and involved an attack upon a small, isolated Army base, Command Outpost Keating. According to Romesha, COP Keating was designed by idiots, being surrounded by high mountainous ground full of cover, looking directly into the base, and with its helicopter landing zone outside the perimeter. Moreover, again according to Romesha, the officer who was in charge until very shortly before the battle, Captain Melvin Porter, was criminally incompetent and allowed the perimeter defenses to fall into decay, despite repeated requests from Romesha and his friends to improve them. (COP Keating was supposed to be shut down, and in fact had been largely packed up, so that was apparently Porter's reasoning.) The Taliban assembled roughly three hundred men (to Keating's sixty or so, along with fifty or sixty Afghans, all of whom immediately ran from the battle or cowered until it was over), and carefully studied the patterns and habits of the Americans, using the high ground to observe and test by fire.

On October 3, 2009, at dawn, the Taliban attacked from all sides, using a variety of heavy weaponry, including rockets, *dishkas* (roughly the Russian equivalent of the American .50 caliber M2 Browning machine gun, firing a round five inches long with a bullet half an inch in diameter, and an capable anti-helicopter weapon), various belt-fed guns and magazine-fed rifles, and massive supplies of ammunition. The Americans were driven back from the perimeter; the outpost was breached and partially overrun by teams of Taliban; and the American mortars, their most effective long-range weapon, were suppressed by the enemy. The camp began to burn and several soldiers were cut off in gun emplacements near the perimeter, which were nothing more than armored and sandbagged Humvees.

Most of the book is a blow-by-blow description of the battle as it evolved. It is engrossing and compelling. The descriptions are well written, and the inside cover has a very helpful isometric drawing of the base, so it is possible to closely follow the battle and to imagine oneself there, to a point at least. Verisimilitude is also offered by descriptions of text messages, sent on a secure network, that are apparently one of the main methods today of communication during battle, especially beyond the immediate area. Interestingly, Romesha quotes these extensively, noting at one point in passing that they're classified, but also that all of them had been revealed by WikiLeaks, presumably why he was permitted to publish them.

Ultimately, the Americans, having initially fallen back, pushed to take back the outpost, led on the ground by Romesha, and heavily supported by massive air power of intermittent effectiveness. Twelve hours later, ground reinforcements in the form of American and Afghan elite forces (the latter presumably of higher quality than the Afghans the outpost had initially been graced with) arrived and cleared the entire area, allowing the wounded to be evacuated and the post to be resupplied. Eight United States soldiers died, and many more were wounded—about the same ratio of dead and wounded, Romesha notes, as the Taliban suffered, though their absolute numbers were higher. The book ends with the evacuation and deliberate destruction of COP Keating, the award to Romesha of the Medal of Honor in 2013, and an epilogue briefly describing post-battle happenings in the lives of Romesha and some of the surviving members of his platoon.

The reader is left quite satisfied. It's not all perfect, though. The telling is, or nearly so, but the substance, upon examination, has problems, mostly relating to Romesha's treatment of other soldiers. The author is fond of crisply denigrating numerous other members of his troop, both of his own platoon and even more of the other two platoons. To a degree, this adds realism, but eventually the reader begins to suspect that Romesha is puffing his own personal friends, and himself, at the expense of people he dislikes. Thus, he bitterly complains that one man, Sergeant Jonathan Hill of Blue Platoon, repeatedly failed to support him with covering fire when needed, and when agreed upon, leaving Romesha and his team exposed to withering enemy attacks. He implies several times that other men were cowards. He also makes clear that

other men who have no specified character defect or failure in battle were still low on the dominance hierarchy, at the top of which were his friends and himself, of course.

For all I know, this is just how men in the military view each other. But Romesha's slant goes beyond this, to what are effectively lies. Hill, for example, was awarded the Silver Star, the army's third-highest combat decoration, a fact Romesha conveniently leaves out. The most egregious example of Romesha's effective falsehoods is his nasty treatment of Sergeant Ty Carter, of White Platoon. Romesha claims he had "a reputation as an oily, smooth-talking douche bag," implying that was accurate. Romesha's best friend didn't like Carter, because he believed (as obviously does Romesha), that Carter had committed, but not been punished for, some unspecified honor code violation at sniper school (back in the United States). He snickers at Carter for not perfectly cutting down a burning tree with a chainsaw, because the tree fell the wrong way. But Carter saved the outpost's aid station, filled with wounded men, from burning, and I bet nobody I know, or you know, could cut down a giant burning pine tree with a chainsaw (a small one, presumably not there to cut down big trees) while people were shooting RPGs and machine guns at him from all directions, and then go on to save other lives under fire while killing enemy soldiers. (I do have one friend who served in locations similar to Keating, so maybe he could have done it. Not me, though.)

Finally, Romesha grudgingly admits that Carter partially redeemed himself, or rather, managed to "find his center as a soldier," only when he retrieved a wounded friend of Romesha's, while working with Romesha's best friend (who as I say despised Carter). But nowhere in his entire book does Romesha note that Carter was *also* awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during the battle for COP Keating, one of only thirteen other soldiers awarded the Medal of Honor for combat in Afghanistan, over the past sixteen years. He doesn't even mention Carter when he's talking about his own award. Romesha modestly declaims that "singling me out for such a superlative commendation struck me as both inappropriate and wrong. . . . I could easily have picked half a dozen men who truly deserved selection." He lists those half dozen men, too, but doesn't include Carter. Thus, when Romesha says Carter found "his center as a soldier," he implies that Carter managed to measure up

to the average, at best. This is a lie by omission, and it undercuts the veracity of Romesha's entire account. No doubt Romesha is a genuine hero, but that's no reason to let this sort of unjust narration pass without comment.

*Red Platoon* is entertainment, not political commentary. The only political comment, indirect at that, is when Romesha, slightly bizarrely, quotes a platoon-mate who shook Barack Obama's hand, "The man had soft hands. I mean, *real* soft. In fact, I don't think that there's any part of my body that's that soft." That strikes me as an inappropriate comment on the President of the United States when he is awarding you the highest honor in the land. Why shouldn't Obama, who was an intellectual (or at least he played one on TV), not a stonemason, have soft hands?

In any case, reading *Red Platoon* is reading the book version of a war movie, and most readers, like most moviegoers, are reading to be entertained. They do not ask, and most soldiers throughout history have not asked, to what end it is necessary that men fight and die in a remote Afghan valley. But we should ask that question, especially because we've been fighting in Afghanistan for sixteen years.

The answer to that question, it seems to me, is that it is to no useful end. Afghanistan is not worth the bones of a single Nebraskan private. We should let the Afghans rot. My guess is that most Afghans want today what they wanted in 330 B.C., when Alexander the Great rolled through. They want to be left alone, to live their life as they see fit. True, they live their lives in a crappy manner, and their culture is extremely defective in myriad ways, even if not infrequently individual Afghans display strong virtue, usually of the martial type. For the most part, Afghan cultural defects have nothing to do with their failure to buy into modern liberal democracy, which is what we offer them and in which they have no interest, and everything to do with them being a mountainous (and thus insular), poor, tribal culture not blessed by Christianity and the (pre-modern version of) Western culture it created. But that they live in a crappy way is not our problem to be concerned about. Most Afghans support the Taliban. Those that don't do not support the United States; they merely want a somewhat less nasty Islamic state, though some want a nastier, ISIS-type one. I bet the number of Afghans who truly want democracy or any aspect of Western culture,

good or bad, can be counted on one hand. Why we should be involved in any of this is beyond me.

Sure, we should kill our enemies. It's very obvious, though, that building outposts that are designed, like Keating, to support projects of infrastructure improvement for Afghans, in the forlorn hope that they will adopt Western attitudes toward development and democracy, is a failed project. Maybe we should just conduct drone strikes on our enemies. Maybe we shouldn't, because every time we drone a wedding party by accident, it is perfectly true that we are creating hatreds that didn't exist before. It is one thing to dislike America in a theoretical, distant way, in the same way that all strict Muslims dislike the rulers of any area not dominated by Islam. Contra George W. Bush, who was astoundingly ignorant of Islam, they don't hate us for our freedoms. But strict Muslims, like everyone else, almost all just want to live their lives in their own way—until their children are killed by Americans sitting in an air-conditioned trailer somewhere outside the Kansas City suburbs. Thus, there is a strong argument that all of this is counter-productive. Maybe we should just let the Muslims slug it out among themselves, as they always have, in the areas of the world dominated by Islam, like Syria, and stick to aggressively defending the bloody borders of Islam against further encroachment, while working hard to roll them back when possible. It'd be cheaper, in lives and treasure, and make us fewer enemies. Unfortunately, though, this approach seems of limited attractiveness to our modern ruling class, corrupt and drunk on power.

Leaving the big questions aside, I note that *Red Platoon*, like earlier Iraq and Afghanistan war autobiographies, is apparently slated to be made into a movie. Ben Affleck was supposed to direct, at least until he was discovered to have assisted the bad behavior of Harvey Weinstein. Perhaps the movie will get made; or perhaps, in these post-Obama days, Hollywood no longer sees a reason to support America. Still, despite my concerns with Romesha's portrayal of his fellow soldiers, and with our whole Afghanistan project, it would be a service to America if the heroism depicted in this book were communicated to a larger audience, as an object lesson in virtue, as well as for entertainment.