



Michael J. Forsyth. *A Year in Command in Afghanistan: Journal of a United States Army Battalion Commander, 2009-2010.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2016. 364 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-7287-1.

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In his book *A Year in Command in Afghanistan: Journal of a United States Army Battalion Commander, 2009-2010*, Michael J. Forsyth provides key insights to Army officers preparing to command tactical elements in a combat environment by diligently journaling each day of his own unique experiences battling insurgents in north-eastern Afghanistan. This book is quite literally an expanded diary, supplemented with insights added after the fact, that covers approximately a two-year period describing the train-up, deployment, and postdeployment of the 2nd Battalion, 77th Field Artillery Regiment (2-77th) to a 30-by-40-mile area of Afghanistan known as N2KL because it encompassed parts of Nangarhar, Nuristan, Konar, and Laghman provinces. Forsyth's book offers an insider's view into the challenges, frustrations, small victories, and maddening near-misses that he and many other tactical leaders experienced as they battled a determined insurgent force, tentative local security forces, and corrupt political leaders prevalent across Afghanistan.

Forsyth's preparation for his year in Afghanistan details the highly organized and effective train-up program that the Army had developed for deploying units at the tactical level. He focused on building a cohesive command team through historical battlefield staff rides, training exercises, and social events. Forsyth also stressed physical

fitness, anticipating the challenging terrain his battalion would be operating in once deployed. Beyond his own efforts at honing his battalion, the reader gets a look into the highly organized and well-practiced predeployment training protocols that the US Army had refined since 9/11 with both command post and live-fire exercises, combined with a predeployment site survey to the projected area of operations (AO). Finally, after this comprehensive preparation period, the 2-77th deployed to Afghanistan in early June 2009.

After his arrival, Forsyth chronicles his initial optimism and determination to help the Afghans defeat the insurgency in his AO, but then the reader follows his slow slide into a more hardened and cynical realist as he deals with corrupt politicians and ineffective Afghan security forces. The first major mission that the 2-77th received was to provide security for the Afghan national election on August 20, 2009. Forsyth had no major election problems in his AO, and despite charges of fraud, the election was considered a success both locally and nationally. Then the battalion shifted its focus to building up the capacity of the regional and local government officials as well as Afghan security forces, both local and national, that were operating in the region, ultimately forging a strategy of "security, governance, and development" while trying to ensure that Afghans would lead the effort.

This was in line with the “clear, hold, build” counterinsurgency doctrine championed by General McChrystal and the coalition leadership team in Kabul.

The psychological tipping point in Forsyth’s slow transformation from eager, optimistic, hard-charging battalion commander into a pessimistic realist was the death of one of his soldiers from an IED blast in December 2009. Yet he remained determined to forge ahead with his mission. After this tragic event, Forsyth made the decision to be more deliberate in putting Afghans out front as decision-makers and doers for their own benefit. He writes, “From now on we had to force the Afghans to do their duty instead of doing it for them because it was easier” (p. 223).

On April 2, 2010, Forsyth’s mission shifted for the final time in the deployment as he formally took on the partnering mission with an Afghan National Army (ANA) brigade commander, garnering a few small wins to go along with the far more common disappointments as he tried to prepare the brigade to eventually become self-sufficient.

Overall, Forsyth successfully conveys the difficulties and frustrations of trying to lead a battalion in extremely difficult counterinsurgency conditions plagued by underperforming military counterparts and corrupt political officials. However, at times in this book, Forsyth’s tone comes across as slightly pretentious, chronicling the flaws of others far more readily than he admits his own mistakes. Some self-reflective analysis of his own lessons learned, or perhaps some things he would have done differently in hindsight, would have been valuable information to future tactical leaders deploying to a similar environment.

Additionally, Forsyth finishes the book with a “Possibilities” chapter that seems disconnected from the rest of his narrative. In this conclusion, we do not get the former battalion commander Forsyth listing the “possibilities” that could lead to success in his former AO, the place he spent more than 300 pages detailing; instead, it reads more like

Air Force Academy history professor Forsyth (his follow-on assignment) giving a strategic perspective on how the United States can help bring about a successful conclusion to the war in Afghanistan. His recommendations are reasonable, but “Professor” Forsyth’s “possibilities” probably belonged in a different book, one that covers the war from a more strategic level. Readers of this book will likely be disappointed at not hearing conclusions from the former battalion commander on what might work better for future tactical commanders deployed to other district- and province-level AOs in Afghanistan or somewhere similar.

Nevertheless, *A Year in Command in Afghanistan* is a valuable resource for those who want a vivid firsthand account of what it is like to have responsibility for a 1,200-square-mile section of rough terrain, trying to quell a growing insurgency while working alongside less-than-adequate partner forces reporting to often corrupt political officials. Readers will undoubtedly feel sympathy for Forsyth and many others who shouldered this extremely difficult task over the many years of US involvement in Afghanistan.

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