

First Casualty: The Untold Story of the CIA Mission to Avenge 9/11

Tony Harnden (Little, Brown and Company), 412 pages, bibliography, notes, index, photos

Reviewed by Mike R.

Toby Harnden, a veteran foreign correspondent and author specializing in conflict zones, has written a powerful book about one of the first allied insertions behind enemy lines in Afghanistan after the events of September 11, 2001. A captivating account of a recent chapter in history of great intelligence, military, and foreign policy consequence, *First Casualty* is an impressive addition to the literature of America's "longest war."

The title refers to the initial victim of what would become a nearly 20-year-long war: Johnny Micheal (Mike) Spann, a 32-year-old CIA paramilitary officer recently arrived at Langley by way of service in the Marine Corps. Spann was killed on November 25, 2001, during an attack by several hundred ostensible al-Qa'ida prisoners at the Qala-I Jangi fort outside Mazar-e Sharif, in northern Balkh Province. Although often referred to as a prisoner uprising, the events at Qala-i Jangi were part of a more complex undertaking. It would gradually transpire that these fighters' presence at the fort had been a feigned surrender, one element of a broader plan to launch a coordinated counterassault on the CIA's Afghan allies throughout the sector, even though it did not end up playing out exactly as expected.

Spann and CIA colleague David Tyson, unaware of these plans, were there that day to conduct the first interrogations of al-Qa'ida personnel in the new global war on terror, a heady undertaking urged on by top CIA management at a time when it was believed additional al-Qa'ida attacks could be coming at any moment. Spann in particular was eager to take part, although everyone realized the risks. Security was being left in the hands of Afghan partners, who were vastly outnumbered, and not all of the prisoners had been thoroughly searched for weapons. The uprising and US casualty would be seared into the world's consciousness through contemporary reporting from the scene, and frequently paired with the revelation from the same event of the capture of US citizen John Walker

Lindh, the "American Taliban," a misnomer given his al-Qa'ida affiliation, but an epithet that has remained to this day nonetheless.

Although titled *First Casualty*, the book is not about Spann's death *per se*. His story provides the emotional core, but the circumstances of his death occupy only a few pages. If one could say there were a protagonist, that role would probably be accorded to Tyson, with whom the author begins and ends his tale, but *First Casualty* is far more a collective story than that of any one individual. The central characters in Harnden's book are the eight members of "Team Alpha"—Tyson, Spann, and six other individuals—part of an alphabet soup of small CIA elements representing the initial US response to 9/11. Led by officers with a mix of operational, linguistic, and paramilitary skills, supplemented with military detailees, their mission was essentially three-fold. They were sent in to secure the cooperation of Afghan resistance elements; to acquire intelligence on al-Qa'ida and on local enemy dispositions; and to support military action to uproot the terrorists and topple their Taliban hosts, who had provided safe haven to Usama bin Ladin. Team Alpha would for a while be tied at the hip with a counterpart Special Forces unit that followed it into Afghanistan two days later, in a pattern of close CIA-military partnership echoed across the country.

Team Alpha was not the first CIA unit to deploy to Afghanistan; "Jawbreaker," which had occasionally ventured into the country over the previous several years, was inserted just 15 days after 9/11 into the sliver of land northeast of Kabul held by the Northern Alliance faction. Jawbreaker's exploits were famously recounted in memoirs by its initial leaders, Gary Schroen and Gary Berntsen, in *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* and *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda: A Personal Account by the CIA's Key Field Commander*,

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respectively.^a Yet for a brief period these two CIA teams were a study in contrasts—Jawbreaker making slow progress mobilizing the forces whose charismatic leader Ahmad Shah Massoud was assassinated by al-Qa’ida two days before 9/11, while Team Alpha was actively advancing, rallying tribal support and taking the fight to the enemy. Harnden takes some digs at Jawbreaker in what could be seen as favoritism toward the stars of his story, but, in the end, all of these teams played vital roles and any criticisms pale by comparison to their accomplishments.

First Casualty concentrates on the initial deployment of forces into Taliban-controlled territory, telling it in day-by-day fashion. It follows Team Alpha’s formation through its insertion on Day One, October 17, 2001, to Spann’s death during Thanksgiving week on Day 40, and culminates in the days afterward with the eventual termination of hostilities at the prison fort and the recovery and return of Spann’s body to the US in early December. Although Harnden primarily sees events from the perspective of Team Alpha, he captures the vantage point of many other key cast members as well. These include not just other CIA officers in the region and at CIA headquarters in Virginia, but a range of US and UK military actors and Afghan personalities.

As a dual US-UK citizen with a military background, and an award-winning book on a different aspect of the Afghan war under his belt, the author is well suited to the task. Capitalizing on his British background, one of the most impressive stories he tells is the support provided by the UK’s Special Boat Service (SBS) and its impact on the SBS legacy going forward. He also conveys action from the highest levels of state to the most junior ranks in the field. Dozens of pages of author’s notes and source descriptions attest to the extensive effort behind this, and his cultivation of sources pays remarkable dividends in terms of the extent to which many individuals open up to him, including the provision of unparalleled photos.

That rare find of a non-fiction book that reads as if fiction, *First Casualty* draws you in and takes hold of you. The opening chapters introducing the main characters are reminiscent of watching a Hollywood action film where the disparate members of the team come together. Harnden’s style of writing conveys the action visually

to drive the message home. He has a knack for choosing just the right reference, even if some of them may be a bit over the top. Historical comparisons run from the Team Alpha leader fearing he was in a modern-day “Rorke’s Drift, the 1879 battle in which a British force of 150 had to defend itself against 4,000 Zulus,” to the euphoria over the Taliban’s dispersal from Mazar-e Sharif as “akin to the 1945 liberation of Europe.”

The book’s images are full of contrasts, laced with humor and irony. Amid scenes of carnage, he speaks of Northern Alliance fighters taking a break on the sidelines eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and smoking hashish. Elsewhere, a witness describes watching a taxi cab pull up at the fort and several fully armed soldiers hopping out to go to war. Pop culture references run from the Beatles to *Apocalypse Now*. There is even room for a classic fairy tale: in the immediate aftermath of Spann’s death, while forces are scrambling for survival, “two Hazaras tossed over their purple-and-green plaid turbans to use as climbing ropes. The major felt he was in some Afghan adaptation of ‘Rapunzel.’ He grabbed the turban with both hands, leaned back, and walked up the side of the fort to the top.”

The author has a chameleon-like ability to adapt the narrative style to the purpose at hand. At times, the book feels as if Tom Clancy has taken over, inserting his predilection for techno-military jargon. In other instances, he channels his inner Bob Woodward, recreating a fly-on-the-wall approach to high-level policy meetings. One such interaction takes place at a National Security Council meeting two days after 9/11 between President George W. Bush and Cofer Black, director of CIA’s Counterterrorism Center (CTC), about to be handed the lead in the US government’s fight in Afghanistan:

... Bush asked [Black] how long it would take for the Taliban regime to fall. ‘Once we’re fully deployed on the ground, it should go in weeks,’ he replied. There was silence in the room. Even [CIA Director George] Tenet thought the timeline ambitious. Bush stared, unblinking, at the wall at the far end of the Situation Room for more than ten seconds, perhaps fifteen. It seemed like a lifetime to Black, who began to wonder if he had overdone it. (47)

a. See reviews by J. Daniel Moore, *Studies in Intelligence* 49, No 4 (2005), and Hayden Peake, “The Intelligence Officer’s Bookshelf,” *Studies in Intelligence* 50, No. 3 (September 2006).

While *First Casualty* is an in-the-weeds account of the successes and failures of a small group of men operating on the other side of the world, it is at the same time a microcosm for the larger conflict. Harnden uses the drama of Team Alpha's deployment to frame strategic issues that would have enormous import at the time and in the years to come. He drives home, for example, the tug-of-war between actors at multiple levels. The Pentagon and CIA battle over who would be first in and who would call the shots in the initial response in Afghanistan. Opinion is divided between and within multiple agencies over the role that should be accorded the country's most prominent warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum. Internal CIA factions competed over primacy of approach, whether to favor an assemblage of minority groups from the north or to rely on a predominantly Pashtun force with strong Pakistani ties as the country is taken back from the Taliban.

First Casualty celebrates the wide array of individuals and experiences thrown together in the post-9/11 melting pot. Spann himself is a walking contradiction to his profession: according to a classmate during CIA training, Mike was "very black-and-white[.] He wasn't traditional case-officer material. Case officers live in a world of nuance and gray." Tyson's background, meanwhile, made him perhaps the unlikeliest of Team Alpha's contingent—an academic with a knack for languages among warriors and operators, a Central Eurasia specialist among CTC and Near East adherents. It is also a tale of strange bed-fellows. Citing the improvised team that rallied together at the fort after Spann's death, "It was a unique group: a Green Beret, a CIA officer, an SBS commando, a Navy SEAL, and an Afghan commander." That diversity underpins this very human and poignant tale. It takes all types, and the author captures this with a grace and inclusiveness not easily matched. Harnden concludes the book with what became of most of the individuals in the years afterward. We learn that many in Team Alpha went on to have long and successful careers, rising to the highest

ranks before retiring, though this is counterbalanced by news that another member of the team perished in the field a few years ago.

Harnden does not put everyone on a pedestal. He is evenhanded, calling them like he sees them, unstinting in his praise, yet not shying away from criticism. All is situationally dependent; there are no purely good or bad characters. The book contains less-than-flattering scenes of Tyson, who would go on to receive the CIA's highest award for valor, while showcasing impressive military and leadership actions on the part of Dostum, frequently described as an opportunist changing sides at the drop of a hat. In an Author's Note, Harnden writes:

First Casualty does not seek to pass judgment on those who, to use Theodore Roosevelt's phrase, were 'in the arena...marred by dust and sweat and blood.' War is chaotic and terrifying and, by its nature, replete with mistakes. Bravery coexists with fear, selflessness with the instinct for self-preservation. Every person who chose to put themselves in harm's way in Afghanistan after 9/11 has my admiration for that act of courage and patriotism. (339)

With the distance of time, 20 years since 9/11, the author provides a perspective not so easily afforded to more contemporaneous accounts. And *First Casualty* could not have emerged at a more timely moment, capturing the war's trajectory, in terms both geopolitical and personal, for an audience highly attuned once again to developments nine and a half time zones away from Washington. Harnden's last chronological reference is to President Biden's announcement in April 2021 of the planned US withdrawal. Months later, it would be a denouement replete with its own tales of tragedy and heroism that we can only hope will one day furnish the materials for another book of this same caliber.



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