

BOOK REVIEW

A Heavy Reckoning: War, Medicine and Survival in Afghanistan and Beyond by Emily Mayhew

Hardback, 320 pages
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Military medicine has evolved so much in recent years that those who previously suffered catastrophic injuries, and would not have survived despite the best efforts of the military medic, can be routinely saved. Today, these “unexpected survivors” are given the most advanced medical care from the point of wounding until they resume a life back with their families.

The book is split into three parts with twenty-six chapters, an epilogue and extensive footnotes. The flyleaf tells us that the author “explores the modern reality of medicine and injury in wartime” from the trenches of World War One via Afghanistan to the wards of Headley Court.

When I opened the book, I was expecting a history of military medicine over the last one hundred years but, instead, it is a contemporary history about medicine in Afghanistan and how it has evolved to such an advanced standard. By using three examples of those wounded, the author details the various stages of their treatments from the initial injury to rehabilitation at Headley Court. During these journeys, she refers back to the First World War and the roots of military surgery.

This is not just a book about the wounded; it is also a book about the medics themselves and how they coped mentally after treating such devastating injuries day in and day out. Some accomplished this by walking the military dogs; others by writing poetry, building a garden or playing volleyball. We are now used to seeing wounded warriors on our television screens thanks to the Invictus Games and the Paralympics but the lay person, although he or she may know how these soldiers and marines lost limbs, will likely know little of their journey from injury to recovery. Emily Mayhew has now rectified that gap in our knowledge.

The contents of *A Heavy Reckoning* may be all too familiar to the military clinician, but this is a book that should be read by all others with an interest in medicine, especially military medicine, and also by those acquainted with someone wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Mayhew’s book is a valuable contribution to the history of military medicine and I can find little to fault it.

Pete Starling
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