

BOOK REVIEW

The Hunter and the Hunted: A Review of *Hunting the Caliphate*

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*SHEEEEWWWWW ... SMACK! Another enemy rocket-propelled grenade whistled over our heads. It struck the low-lying rocks just a few meters in front of us off the west side of the road. The only thing that saved us—it was a dud.*¹

*Before he departed for Jordan, General Austin's last words to me were, "Be ready Dana."*²

I. TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

Hunting the Caliphate, a co-authored book detailing the authors' firsthand experiences of fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) from the summer of 2014 until the fall of 2015, provides a remarkably personal first draft of history. Dana J.H. Pittard, the commander of the U.S. forces fighting ISIS in 2014 and 2015 and an Army Major General (MG) at the time,³ provides a bird's

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1. MAJOR GENERAL DANA J.H. PITTARD & MASTER SERGEANT WES J. BRYANT, *HUNTING THE CALIPHATE* 29 (2019). For clarity's sake, this book review will refer to the authors at the ranks they held at the time they retired. Additionally, this book review will refer to the terrorist group which took over large portions of Iraq in 2014 as the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS).

2. *Id.* at 38.

3. *Id.* at 325.

eye view of U.S. efforts in Iraq and Syria.⁴ Wes J. Bryant, senior Special Forces (SF) Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) and an Air Force Master Sergeant (MSgt),⁵ gives readers an up-close look at the fight against ISIS.⁶ Each author provides his own point of view, and the book clearly marks where one perspective ends and the next begins.⁷ Rather than becoming a distraction, the passing of the narrative from general to non-commissioned officer creates a dynamic tension that not only drives the book forward, but serves to set it apart from other books about the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Few of the leading books concerning ISIS feature a first-person perspective.⁸ Additionally, as the authors point out, *Hunting the Caliphate* is “the first major book written by a JTAC,”⁹ a remarkable fact given the key role of airpower in the fight against ISIS.¹⁰ This pairing creates an account of the fight against ISIS that is equally at ease discussing meetings with senators¹¹ and speeches to foreign generals on the one hand, and the inner workings of a strike cell on the other.¹²

The authors aim, with their unique perspectives, is to provide a clearer understanding of war to both the American public in general and policy makers in particular. In this, they succeed, providing a view of the fight against ISIS that captures valuable details and insights.¹³ The authors keep themselves from getting bogged down in trivia and jargon in a way that would lose a reader not familiar with the strange and seemingly foreign cadence of military in-speak.¹⁴ Further assistance to the casual student of military affairs comes in the form of a collection of maps which help orient the reader,¹⁵ in addition to a small selection of photographs putting faces to the names of recurring personalities.¹⁶ But this book,

4. See, e.g., *id.* at 126–30 (detailing Major General (MG) Pittard’s efforts to get Iraqi and Kurdish forces working together against ISIS).

5. *Id.* at 325.

6. See, e.g., *id.* at 239–42 (recounting Master Sergeant (MSgt) Bryant coordinating airstrikes in concert with an Iraqi M1 tank, using the tank’s barrel to designate enemy positions).

7. See, e.g., *id.* at 243–7 (discussing MSgt Bryant’s impressions of the initial U.S. airstrikes in Syria, followed by remarks from MG Pittard).

8. See, e.g., *The Islamic State: 5 of the Best Books on ISIS to Read Now*, PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE, <https://perma.cc/AJK4-6F7D> (Sept. 19, 2023) (including only one firsthand account, one by a woman taken prisoner during the conflict).

9. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at xvi.

10. BECCA WASSER ET AL., *THE AIR WAR AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE: THE ROLE OF AIRPOWER IN OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE* xv (2020).

11. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at 248–54 (recounting MG Pittard’s often tense interactions with Senator John McCain during the latter’s December 2014 visit to Iraq).

12. *Id.* at 170–6 (detailing the layout and operations of the strike cell at Baghdad International Airport).

13. See, e.g., *id.* at 134 (describing how U.S. personnel devised procedures allowing Iraqi forces to use their cell phones to enable airstrikes).

14. The bewildering array of acronyms, abbreviations, and slang that make up military conversation has led some to compile guides not unlike phrasebooks for a foreign language. See Ben Brody, *U.S. Military Lingo: The (Almost) Definitive Guide*, NAT’L PUB. RADIO (Dec. 4, 2013, 3:52 PM) <https://perma.cc/65B4-KJY7>.

15. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at xviii–xxiv.

16. *Id.* at 280–9.

concerning one of America's most recent adversaries and new developments in how U.S. forces engage in warfare, also earns a place on the military professional's bookshelf.

II. A MOMENT IN TIME

The study of history is critical not only to the profession of arms, but also to maintaining the military legal professional's ability to provide principled counsel.¹⁷ While looking to the distant past holds the promise of finding timeless principles,¹⁸ looking to the recent history captured in *Hunting the Caliphate* is no less rewarding in the sense that it can show military readers about the origins of issues defining their own time.

A. *Mind the Gap*

One of the strengths of *Hunting the Caliphate* is its discussion of the rise of the strike cell, the sensor-fused command post with multiple drone feeds that allowed U.S. forces "to conduct precise airstrikes on a significant scale without forward controllers on the ground."¹⁹ The strike cell enabled tens of thousands of strikes in the campaign against ISIS,²⁰ and arguably marks the apogee of GWOT in terms of precision and minimizing collateral damage.²¹ While sensible in the context of counter-terrorism, the habits of decades of fighting in the Middle East could be ill-suited to large-scale combat operations (LSCO), the clash of mass armies involving industrial quantities of highly destructive weapons such as the current conflict in Ukraine.²² This was one of the insights of Lieutenant General Charles Pede and Colonel Peter Hayden in their article *The Eighteenth Gap*.²³ In this article, they discussed the risks posed by Service members inappropriately transferring practices and mental rubrics from the GWOT to a LSCO environment.²⁴ The former Judge Advocate General, Lieutenant General Stuart Risch, emphasized that the Judge Advocate General's Corps bears special responsibility to ensure that commanders and staff receive the legal training to combat the temptation of falling back into old habits.²⁵

17. Maurice A. Lescault, Jr., *To Remain Principled in Our Counsel, We Must Continually Learn from Our History: A Review of Honor in the Dust*, ARMY LAW., no. 3, 2022, at 18, 19.

18. *See id.* at 20.

19. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at xi.

20. *Id.* at xiii (citing *Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Operations to Defeat ISIS*, DEP'T OF DEF. (Sept. 19, 2023)).

21. *See* WASSER ET AL., *supra* note 10, at 305–6.

22. *See, e.g.*, U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-84, LEGAL SUPPORT TO OPERATIONS para. 3-40 (Sept. 1, 2023).

23. Lieutenant General Charles N. Pede & Colonel Peter R. Hayden, *The Eighteenth Gap: Preserving the Commander's Legal Maneuver Space on "Battlefield Next,"* MIL. REV., Mar.-Apr. 2021, at 6.

24. *Id.* at 8.

25. *See* Lieutenant General Stuart W. Risch & Colonel Ryan B. Dowdy, *No. 3: Multi-Domain Operations: Judge Advocate Legal Services' Role in MDO and Bridging the Eighteenth Capability Gap*, 2022 ARMY LAW. (Issue 4) 91, 92.

Hunting the Caliphate provides an excellent illustration of how this dynamic works. The book's authors provide not only the accounts of strike cells enabling huge numbers of successful precision strikes, but also accounts of the same technology permitting staffs thousands of miles away to second guess strike decisions,²⁶ supporting unit weapons officers to question weaponeering decisions,²⁷ and the somewhat surreal spectacle of the strike cell directing F/A-18 gun runs at individual ISIS fighters,²⁸ all in real time. As blatant as some of these excesses of control and micromanagement may seem, *Hunting the Caliphate* also demonstrates why some of these habits may be hard to kick in LSCO. In one particularly hair-raising incident, U.S. forces come within mere moments of killing hundreds of friendly Kurdish Peshmerga with airstrikes.²⁹ MG Pittard only avoids tragedy by dint of intuition born of years of working with the Kurdish forces on previous deployments to Iraq and the situational awareness cultivated through persistent Predator drone coverage, allowing him to accurately identify the large group of armed men on the drone feed as allied Kurds rather than enemy ISIS fighters as originally reported.³⁰ In LSCO, where domains like air, space, and cyberspace will be hotly contested, this level of situational awareness is unlikely. Commanders and staffs accustomed to having persistent surveillance available will face the difficult task of rejecting the programming of memories like this in a LSCO context.³¹ *Hunting the Caliphate* arms the military professional with a potent reminder of how deeply ingrained this programming may be.

*B. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*³²

Military legal professionals make a number of cameos in *Hunting the Caliphate* and these appearances provide powerful lessons for any national security law practitioner. Early in the fight against ISIS, the Rules of Engagement (ROE) required that SF teams taking fire from ISIS seek the approval of the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq before calling in airstrikes.³³ MSgt Bryant, recognizing the danger the ROE posed to the SF teams, worked hand in hand with two Command Judge Advocates (JAs) to draft proposals to change the ROE.³⁴ These JAs also helped MSgt Bryant staff the proposals through U.S. Central Command, and eventually secured a change to the ROE permitting SF team leaders to use close air support without calling back to a distant headquarters.³⁵ This positive example demonstrates what engaged JAs can accomplish in concert with their units.

26. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at 6–7.

27. *Id.* at 233.

28. *Id.* at 210–13.

29. *Id.* at 107.

30. *Id.* at 106.

31. See Pede & Hayden, *supra* note 23, at 16–18.

32. THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY (Produzioni Europee Associate 1966).

33. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at 81.

34. *Id.* at 82.

35. *Id.* at 82–84.

Subsequent encounters with military lawyers yielded more frustrating results for MG Pittard and MSgt Bryant. In August of 2014, shortly after receiving clearance to conduct airstrikes against ISIS, the strike cell at the U.S. Embassy detected a group of 600 ISIS fighters when “the lawyers stepped in.”³⁶ Because the ISIS force was a few kilometers beyond a graphic control measure, a line on a map tethered to nothing on the ground and created by the unit operations officer less than forty-eight hours prior, the lawyers refused to certify the strike as legal.³⁷ In another incident, a lawyer assigned to the strike cell misreads the ROE as prohibiting the targeting of wounded or fleeing enemies, setting in motion a chain of events that allowed a senior ISIS leader to fight another day.³⁸ While readers cannot know the whole set of facts the lawyers dealt with in these scenarios, and should approach such issues with a charitable understanding of the tremendous pressures under which those lawyers worked, *Hunting the Caliphate* provides the military legal reader with reason to consider the importance of mastery of the law, and the proper role of the national security law practitioner.³⁹

C. Finding the Thread

Hunting the Caliphate also shows the difficulty of discerning historic trends in the reader’s own time. Many of the issues dominating the current news cycle already show up in the corners of *Hunting the Caliphate*. For example, MG Pittard discusses how the air campaign against ISIS severely strained stocks of certain precision-guided munitions and even began to outstrip the ability of weapons manufacturers to keep up with demand.⁴⁰ This clearly foreshadows the “shell hunger” caused by the war in Ukraine.⁴¹ Similarly, the authors treat the reader to a firsthand view of a newly assertive Russian foreign policy which saw the Russians first “diplomatically outmaneuver[]”⁴² the United States and then muscle in to become militarily involved in Syria.⁴³ That trend finds its current expression, nearly one decade later, in the killing fields of eastern Ukraine.⁴⁴ Finally, and perhaps most poignantly for the military reader, MSgt Bryant frequently returns to his experience in Afghanistan. Describing his participation in Operation Hamza in 2017, a military operation near the Afghan border with Pakistan, MSgt Bryant paints a picture of Afghan forces wholly dependent on

36. *Id.* at 110.

37. *Id.*

38. *Id.* at 266.

39. See Brigadier General David E. Mendelson & Major Matt D. Montazzoli, *Azimuth Check: Advising Commanders and Leaders: Stick to the Fundamentals*, 2022 ARMY LAW. (ISSUE 3) 22 (describing mastery of the law as “table stakes” for advising commanders); Pede & Hayden, *supra* note 23, at 9–10 (discussing the dangers of conflating policy with law).

40. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at 235–6.

41. See Reuters, *U.S. Aims to Make 100,000 Artillery Shells per Month in 2025, U.S. Official Says*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP. (Sept. 15, 2023), <https://perma.cc/653S-L3XG>.

42. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at 39.

43. *Id.* at 270–4.

44. See UN Chief Assails Russia’s War in Ukraine for ‘Unleashing Nexus of Horror,’ REUTERS (Sept. 19, 2023, 11:11 AM), <https://perma.cc/BG6R-WF6D>.

U.S. support and imbued with a sense that they were caught up in “an American fight, not an Afghan one.”⁴⁵ In retrospect, the road from Operation Hamza to the fall of Kabul seems clear.⁴⁶ But, if hindsight is 20/20, the view looking forward is much hazier. Who, standing where MG Pittard and MSgt Bryant did in 2014, would have described the world of 2025?⁴⁷ What loose threads from today threaten to become the front-page stories of tomorrow, defining the future operating environment? *Hunting the Caliphate* provides a powerful spur to engage with these important questions.

D. Scar Tissue

There will surely be more comprehensive histories of the fight against ISIS. There are already more technically minded reports looking back at the campaign.⁴⁸ However, one of the defining qualities of *Hunting the Caliphate* is its unflinching recounting of the human dimension of war. Even in a campaign characterized by drones, precision-guided bombs and missiles, and decisions made in far-off strike cells, *Hunting the Caliphate* makes clear that war is a very human tragedy. The ISIS victory at Mosul in 2014 is followed by mass executions and mass graves.⁴⁹ As the campaign against ISIS gathers momentum and they begin to lose ground, a grisly pattern emerges where ISIS beheads captive civilians after each battlefield loss.⁵⁰

Apart from describing the human toll, *Hunting the Caliphate* also excels in capturing the human interactions that drive history forward. This is especially true of the chapters by MG Pittard. Whether he is exhorting the leaders of the various Iraqi forces making up the coalition to put aside their differences for the good of their country in an impromptu speech,⁵¹ or persuading Senator John McCain that America’s effort in Iraq did not require more “boots on the ground,”⁵² MG Pittard provides the reader a seat inside “the room where it happens.”⁵³

What is, in some ways, more profound, is the remarkably frank way in which the authors describe how the fight against ISIS affected them personally. In their retelling of the conflict, the authors illustrate the truth of General Douglas MacArthur’s observation that Soldiers “must suffer and bear the deepest wounds

45. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at 306–7.

46. See Matthieu Aikins, *Inside the Fall of Kabul*, N.Y. TIMES (Dec. 28, 2021), <https://perma.cc/7A2G-EA7M>.

47. Even the most respected names in geostrategic forecasting enjoy, at best, mixed success. See generally GEORGE FRIEDMAN, *THE NEXT 100 YEARS: A FORECAST FOR THE 21ST CENTURY* (2009) (making a broad array of predictions ranging from unsettlingly prescient to tragically wrong).

48. See, e.g., WASSER ET AL., *supra* note 10.

49. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at 51.

50. *Id.* at 135, 148, 153, 231 (recounting the executions of James Foley, Steve Sotloff, David Haines, and Peter Kassig respectively).

51. *Id.* at 198–9.

52. *Id.* at 251–4.

53. See LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA, *The Room Where It Happens*, on HAMILTON, AN AMERICAN MUSICAL, ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST RECORDING (Atl. Recording Co. 2015).

and scars of war.”⁵⁴ MG Pittard for his part recounts his feelings of anger when the limitations on the U.S. mission in Iraq during the early phases of fight with ISIS relegate him to the role of silent witness to an execution of Yazidi civilians who ISIS had forced to dig their own graves.⁵⁵ He is frank with his frustrations when political infighting in Washington leaves the campaign against ISIS with more restrictions than clear guidance.⁵⁶

MSgt Bryant is often more open. Before the book even begins in earnest, MSgt Bryant recounts his experience in a 2005 engagement between Soldiers of 173d Airborne Brigade, the unit to which MSgt Bryant was attached as a JTAC, and Afghan insurgents.⁵⁷ Over the course of the battle, Staff Sergeant John Doles dies.⁵⁸ MSgt Bryant describes him as “a valiant Soldier and family man.”⁵⁹ MSgt Bryant explains that it is a sense of failure over this loss, and a determination to make sure no more friendly casualties happen on his watch, that propels him for the rest of his career.⁶⁰ Bryant is also upfront about when the stress of the fight with ISIS lead to lapses in leadership. In sharing how a toxic brew of fatigue, pride, and the pressure to perform caused a disagreement with a fellow JTAC on where to direct drone coverage to grow into a screaming match in the strike cell, Bryant owns up to falling short of his own high standards.⁶¹

In what is one of the book’s most remarkable displays of openness and vulnerability, Bryant discusses how an evening in a Bahraini mall causes him to come to grips with his prejudices.⁶² When a group of young Bahraini girls enters the café where he is sitting, he is struck by how similar they are to American teens back home.⁶³ In that moment, he realizes the depth of the prejudices he developed over the course of over a decade fighting in the Middle East, and how unjustified and irrational those prejudices were.⁶⁴ A deep sense of shame and a determination to be an example for his daughters cause Bryant to resolve to address his biases.⁶⁵

While it is almost certainly more comfortable to deal with war as a series of dates and names, of units moving across topographic maps, the military professional must always remember that war is a human endeavor.⁶⁶ More than any

54. Douglas MacArthur, Gen. of the Army, U.S. Army, Sylvanus Thayer Award Acceptance Address to the U.S. Corps of Cadets at the U.S. Mil. Acad. at West Point (May 12, 1962).

55. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at 86–7.

56. *Id.* at 114.

57. *Id.* at 23–32.

58. *Id.* at 31.

59. *Id.*

60. *Id.* at 32.

61. *Id.* at 215–21.

62. *Id.* at 117–21.

63. *Id.* at 118.

64. *Id.* at 119.

65. *Id.* at 120.

66. See General Mark A. Milley, *Strategic Inflection Point*, 110 JOINT FORCES Q.6, 3rd Quarter 2023, at 7. (acknowledging Clausewitz and noting that the nature of war as a contest where “[h]umans will continue to impose their political will on opponents with violence,” is unchanging).

official history of the fight against ISIS, *Hunting the Caliphate* provides a reminder of the human nature of conflict.

III. THIS TIME, IT'S PERSONAL⁶⁷

In the end however, it may be what *Hunting the Caliphate* says to the reader about themselves that is most important. Service members of a certain age will find it difficult not to see something of themselves in this book. Can a generation defined by the response to 9/11⁶⁸ fail to recall where they stood on that day when MG Pittard and MSgt Bryant share their own stories about that tragedy?⁶⁹ Can these Service members forget their own fallen comrades, lost in some of the very same valleys and cities that appear in *Hunting the Caliphate*, while the authors share heart-felt remembrances of those they lost?⁷⁰ Can they avoid a twinge of regret as they read about the authors struggling with the same human failings of temper, bias, and fatigue, that they may have encountered in their deployments to the Middle East?⁷¹ It is hard to imagine. In a way, military readers begin the book by hunting shadowy terrorists in Iraq and Syria and end the book finding themselves. But *Hunting the Caliphate* is more than a mirror. In sharing the firsthand accounts of flesh-and-blood Service members still alive today in a great historical moment, military readers realize that it is people like them who author history. On the one hand, this is a heavy burden. MSgt Bryant acknowledges the weight of this responsibility in his closing to the book when he explains that those who serve their country “strive to make our nation and its endeavors always uphold the ideals we all believe in.”⁷² On the other hand, the role of each person in changing world events is a tremendous opportunity. Despite the challenges and setbacks the military reader has witnessed these last few years, many of them captured in *Hunting the Caliphate*, the profession of arms remains one with unique capacity for history making and doing good in the world.⁷³ The greatest lesson of the authors’ thrilling first draft of history is that there is still history for the reader to make.

67. JAWS 2 (Universal Pictures 1978).

68. See, e.g., Michael Dimock, *Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Jan. 17, 2019), <https://perma.cc/6AME-DVCP> (arguing that Millennials, those currently twenty-six to forty-two years old, were “old enough to comprehend the historical significance” of 9/11 and that they “grew up in the shadow of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.”).

69. PITTARD & BRYANT, *supra* note 1, at 11–16.

70. *Id.* at 23–32.

71. *Id.* at 117–21.

72. *Id.* at 311.

73. MSgt Bryant notes that the rescue of Yazidi civilians trapped by ISIS on Sinjar Mountain in northern Iraq “reminded the world what it means for America to use its might for the good of humanity.” *Id.* at 125.