

Black Hearts – One platoon’s descent into madness in Iraq’s Triangle of Death
by Jim Frederick.
Macmillan 2010.

Many books have now been written about the Iraq War of George W Bush and Tony Blair. They have focussed, inter alia, on various aspects of the policy-making (or lack of it), the internecine state of affairs between the US Defence and State Departments before and in the early stages of the war, the disastrous lack of leadership given to Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the war’s end, the involvement of Iran in the insurgency that followed, the ‘Surge’ strategy of David Petraeus, and so on. Some others have concentrated on the experiences of individual soldiers and units, most memorably to date that of Dexter Filkins’ *The Forever War*.

The Iraq War has also thrown up its fair share of infamy, not least that of the treatment of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison; but in *Black Hearts*, the eminent American journalist Jim Frederick takes the reader into the chilling heart of a dysfunctional American platoon in 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, the self-dubbed ‘Black Heart Brigade’.

Every war throws up its share of atrocities, and it is hardly surprising that men trained to kill may be less sensitive to the morality of their actions than others; nevertheless some deeds vault over the dividing line to such an extent that they stamp themselves on the conflict and become an immovable stain on the reputation of the armed forces responsible.

In the case of the Iraq conflict the action that will for decades epitomise the brutality and heartlessness of the campaign, as well as the dangers inherent in a loathing and contempt for those perceived as the enemy, was the attack by the Black Heart Brigade on the home of the al-Janabi family in March 2006, when four of its members brutally raped a 14 year old girl and then murdered her and her six year old sister and their parents, and in addition set fire to the remains.

This terrible story is meticulously reconstructed by Frederick, an embedded journalist, from the time of the deployment of the battalion to the so-called Triangle of Death, the inner workings of the force as it sought to do its job in extraordinarily stressful conditions amid ghastly and constant violence, the back story of the men of the platoon and especially the four responsible for the atrocity, and finally the way in which they were brought to justice.

Few cogniscent people in the 21st century need books to be reminded of the horrors of war, but *Black Hearts* sounds a clarion call of warning to future generations of the seeds of lasting hatred that have been sown in the Middle East by the Iraq War, and emphasise to us that a huge, multi-faceted military campaign should never blind us to its impact on families and individuals in the conflict zone, of which the brutalization and massacre of the al-Janabi family is a horrible and potent example.

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