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Hammerhead Six: How Green Berets Waged an Unconventional War against the Taliban to Win in Afghanistan's Deadly Pech Valley

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Captain Ronald Fry, with Tad Tuleja. *Hammerhead Six: How Green Berets Waged an Unconventional War against the Taliban to Win in Afghanistan's Deadly Pech Valley.*

New York: Hachette Books, 2016.

Reviewed by Cless Young

Hammerhead Six tells the story of U.S. Army Captain Ronald Fry and his elite team of Special Forces soldiers tasked with the difficult 2003 mission of tracking high-value targets in one of the most dangerous regions of Afghanistan, the Pech Valley. But this is not a typical blood-and-guts, Rambo-like war story. Although the mission called for these soldiers to seize weapons caches, hunt down hardened Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, and avoid IED booby traps, it was their maturity, cultural sensitivity, and humility (a trait not often associated with Special Forces personnel) that made it possible for them to fulfill their military objectives while winning the trust of the locals.

A major theme of the book is the tension between two missions undertaken by Fry and his team: they were primarily a fighting unit, tasked to track down and destroy the enemy, but they were also committed to winning the hearts and minds of local villagers. Like the combat conditions in Vietnam, it was often difficult to distinguish friend from foe. A Taliban could detonate an IED and then return immediately to herding his goats, appearing to be an innocent bystander. The skilled Hammerhead Six team had no problem using their considerable firepower and Special Forces training to hunt down and destroy terrorists in their area of operation, but they were also motivated by their own deeply held moral convictions and the Green Beret motto, "To Free the Oppressed." The background and values Captain Fry brought to his command made it possible for his unit to succeed with both objectives.

Captain Fry comes from a military family. His grandfather fought in World War II, his father in Vietnam. He grew up in a patriotic home, was an Eagle Scout, and entered Brigham Young University on a ROTC scholarship. Following his LDS mission to Switzerland, he visited

Normandy on the fiftieth anniversary of the D-Day landings. This emotional experience reinforced his commitment to serve in uniform.

Upon graduation from BYU, he entered Special Forces training. It was during this time that the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon occurred, and he had a premonition that his Green Beret training might at some point land him in Afghanistan. Soon Fry and his wife decided to transition to the National Guard (reserve component), so he could spend more time with his young family. But as the war on terror intensified, his Special Forces unit was activated, and he was assigned to command Operational Detachment Alpha, code-named “Hammerhead Six.” Their mission was to enter the wild terrain of the Kunar Province on the border with Pakistan and attempt to “eliminate, neutralize, and reduce terrorist forces” (12).

What he and his team accomplished in the short nine months of their mission was remarkable. Many of his tactics and methods flew in the face of traditional military protocol and, in fact, incurred the wrath of his superiors. But his unit’s unorthodox approach, which was based on sensitivity to and respect for the values of the local Muslim culture, was effective.

Fry says that it took him over ten years to finally write the book because the events they lived through “seemed too personal. . . . Several chapters were written painfully, reluctantly and with trembling hands,” he noted (xiii). A particularly poignant example was the accidental death of an innocent villager when a bullet meant for an attacking dog ricocheted and hit a man in the head. In another incident, the team hauled away a man suspected of planting an IED. Fry sensed that the man might not have been guilty. He writes, “We packed him into the back of a truck, a gunny sack over his head. . . . I saw his wife with her face in her hands and his kids crying. . . . I felt less like an American protector than the Gestapo, intent on disappearing troublesome civilians to parts unknown” (51).

Fry was a dedicated and loyal U.S. Army officer, but he didn’t hesitate to point out “boneheaded” and counterproductive decisions made by the military and other government agencies. He understood that the Army is a huge bureaucracy with a top-down organizational structure where “junior officers [which he was] have no strategic responsibility and therefore no way to influence decisions made sometimes thousands of miles away at the top of the chain. They must carry out orders someone else has devised” (27). But Special Forces, operating in the wild and remote areas along the Pakistan border, of necessity had to “do

things differently” (21). Fry was impatient and disgusted with some of the shortsighted and harmful orders that came from his superiors miles away in safe compounds with little or no feel for the local conditions and culture.

Once, to protect his men while they were engaged in a firefight, Fry abandoned a military vehicle and moved them to safety. Senior officers accused him of disobeying orders by leaving a disabled Humvee. At one point, they told him he would have to pay the Army back the \$250,000 cost of the vehicle from his personal account and face the possibility of a court-martial. Although neither of these things actually happened, such examples were typical of the frustrations he dealt with; he was fighting an unconventional war while bound by rules made by traditional, conventional superiors, unfamiliar with the mission of Green Berets.

The best military commanders recognize the strengths and abilities of those under their command. They allow their command to carry out their assignments and take suggestions and feedback. Captain Fry operated in this way. He sought advice and implemented suggestions from his chaplain, his senior medics, and his communications, training, and weapons expert.

The members of his team also helped implement his vision of gaining the support of the indigenous populations. Over their nine-month assignment, Fry’s unit provided services badly needed but absent in the villages, contributed to the local economy with U.S. funds that were responsibly used for projects deemed necessary by the locals themselves, and established training programs for the local army that supported Afghan democracy. They also opened a clinic where locals, primarily women and children, could get needed medical attention without cost. This care was otherwise not available in the region, and the medical staff were kept busy. The unit’s chaplain showed profound respect for Islam by training a local Imam to act as a chaplain for the indigenous soldiers. He also took note of the run-down conditions of village mosques and organized a program to use U.S. money earmarked for improving conditions in the area. Local contractors and materials were used to enhance these religious centers, so important for worship and community activities.

The team also abandoned the standard U.S. military dress and appearance and adopted Afghan attire. They grew beards and wore Afghan Pakol headgear whenever they met with village elders. They regularly socialized with locals, sitting cross-legged and eating Afghan food with their fingers.

Under Fry's command, Hammerhead Six showed respect for Afghan religion and culture, humility and willingness to learn, professionalism and maturity coupled with treating the people as friends, even brothers. This respect paid huge dividends. Not one American soldier was killed during their tour of duty—and this in one of the most dangerous regions of Afghanistan. Later on, under new and arguably less enlightened American forces, over a hundred U.S. troops lost their lives in this same region.

Anyone with a military background should find this book particularly interesting. Others will be informed and even inspired as well. Lay readers will encounter a number of military acronyms, and not all of them are explained in the glossary, although they are defined when they first appear (but not thereafter). Two detailed maps are also provided, which are helpful when trying to get a spatial perspective of the areas of operation. Overall, readers will appreciate *Hammerhead Six* as, among other things, an enlightening account of how Captain Fry and his team did much in Afghanistan to dispel the notion of the ugly American.

Cless Young is retired after twenty-three years as an Army and Air Force chaplain in the Utah and Hawaii National Guard. He also is retired as Associate Professor of Geography at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah.