

Giuseppe Caforio, ed., *Soldiers Without Frontiers: The View from the Ground – Experiences of Asymmetric Warfare*, Rome, Bonanno Editore, 2013, 413 pp.

Reviewed by Thomas Sheppard

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the primary activity of military forces, particularly ground forces, has gravitated towards confronting asymmetric warfare and peacekeeping operations against non-State actors. Whether the future holds another conventional war or not is debatable, but for the moment clashes with unconventional forces and terrorism clearly absorb the greatest energies of the world's militaries. The experiences of soldiers facing such missions is generating a substantial and growing interest among historians and social scientists, but the English-language literature, perhaps not surprisingly, is fixated on the experiences of American and British soldiers. Warfare in the late-twentieth and early-twenty first centuries, however, has evolved not only in its nature but also in its international character. Unilateralism is nonexistent, and difficult to conceive of, in the post-Cold War world, and future armies must be prepared to work closely with allies. Fully understanding the phenomenon of unconventional warfare requires examining the experiences of troops from a host of national backgrounds, and considering how these different nations, societies, and cultures mesh when ordered to fight and maintain peace alongside one another. *Soldiers Without Frontiers* does this by conducting a rigorous survey of combat veterans from multiple nations who have engaged in counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and peacekeeping operations as part of multinational forces.

Giuseppe Caforio, a veteran officer of the Italian Army and a consultant of the Italian Centre of Strategic and Military Studies, has drawn together an outstanding team of researchers to address these issues and more. Chapter authors hail from across the globe, including Africa, Eastern and Western Europe, the United States, the Philippines, and Turkey. They likewise come from disciplines of political science, military studies, and sociology. The emphasis of their study is on medium-sized powers – militaries weaker than the United States or leading NATO nations, but still powerful enough to exert influence in the international system – and how soldiers from these nations experience asymmetric warfare and peacekeeping operations. The countries chosen were Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy, the Philippines, Slovenia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, and Turkey. Caforio's team interviewed “*a non-numerous but significant group of military personnel who had taken part in asymmetric warfare operations*” about their experiences (p.19). They were careful to include officers (237 interviewed), non-commissioned officers (140), and soldiers (165) to provide the widest scope for their research. While the book primarily lists only the results and conclusions of the survey, interested readers can find the complete data at www.soldierswithoutfrontiers.com.

Asymmetric warfare, for the purposes of this work, occurs when “*a weak side, opposing a strong side, uses nonconventional forms of conflict aimed at overcoming the*

gap between the two sides” (p.12). This includes methods of violence, primarily terrorism and guerrilla warfare, but also methods of persuasion. Terrorists, international criminal organizations, and guerrilla armies are adept at using social media and mass communication techniques to convey their message. In general, such forces make use of “*any means of attack at [their] disposal, free of any ethical or normative constraints*” (p.13). Legitimate forces, whether authorized by NATO, the United Nations, or some other international body, must labour under strict regulations about avoiding civilian casualties and observing the commonly-accepted rules of war. Such dissonance inevitably creates tension in the minds of soldiers, and contributes to the unique nature of asymmetric warfare.

The focus of the team’s research is on the perceptions of soldiers themselves. Caforio and the other contributors seek to understand how soldiers interact with their environment, each other, and the enemy. For those deployed on peacekeeping and asymmetric missions, their first exposure is rarely positive. Soldiers expressed shock at the extreme poverty found in many areas, and especially at watching underfed and ill-cared for children suffer under such conditions. Often, soldiers encountered areas where government infrastructure was non-existent, and had been for some time, and this was usually accompanied by physical devastation wrought by warfare. Moreover, soldiers rarely found the population they were ostensibly there to help ready to welcome them with open arms. Respondents describe feelings of dismay and surprise at the hostility of locals, and in some cases, of the governments they had been sent to prop up.

Local hostility can also be exacerbated by cultural differences. South Korean troops stationed in predominantly Muslim cultures, for example, struggled to understand the cultural expectations and taboos of the civilian population. However, given the multinational character of peacekeeping operations, navigating cultural differences extended to one’s fellow soldiers as well as civilians. Soldiers brought different degrees of training and preparation for their missions, and these differences seem to have influenced relations among multinational forces. In general, soldiers found little to criticize in their training and preparation for missions.

Perhaps the most frustrating area of concern for interviewees relates to Rules of Engagement (ROEs). Although they expressed a universal resolve to obey any rules of engagement imposed on them, their responses indicate significant frustration on this point. Unclear rules made it difficult for soldiers to know when retaliation was permissible; the waters are particularly muddy since rules come down from two distinct sources : soldiers’ country of origin and whatever international organization is overseeing a particular mission (usually the United Nations). Competing rules of engagement can even, in some circumstances, prevent soldiers from coming to the aid of fellow forces under attack. The study found that only 28.6% of those interviewed found the rules of engagement imposed on them appropriate ; another 20% declined to answer questions relating to rules of engagement (pp.87-88). The general consensus seems to be that rules of engagement are not sufficiently flexible for the different types of missions that modern

warfare entails. Rafael Martinez, who authored the essay based on this section of the questionnaire, calls for military leaders to “*do a thorough job : a thorough previous analysis of what to do and of the host country*” and to insure that rules of engagement are “*flexible enough to change as conditions change too*”, especially to insure uniform rules for all participating nations (pp.88-89). However, he also indicates that, whatever soldiers’ frustrations, rules of engagement are absolutely necessary to avoid escalating conflicts and potentially dragging nations much deeper than intended into local conflicts.

Soldiers Without Frontiers has much to say about morale and satisfaction among soldiers deployed for asymmetric and unconventional assignments. Not surprisingly, pay is a critical factor ; those who see a significant pay increase during deployment are more likely to express satisfaction with their mission. Officers, however, exhibited greater cynicism than their subordinates. It appears that soldiers far removed from command decisions can achieve greater personal satisfaction by simply fulfilling their orders. But across ranks and service branches, conceptions about the role of armed forces played a major role in satisfaction. Uros Svete and Jelena Juvan conclude that “*the participants proved to be more satisfied with those deployments whose goals were more military and less political*” in their chapter on soldier satisfaction (p.211).

This project makes an undeniable contribution to the literature on military engagement in the post-Cold War world. There are, however, a few critiques that can be fairly levelled at the final product. For one thing, despite the fact that it cites a wealth of social science literature on a host of subjects throughout the text, the authors inexplicably cite Wikipedia for a summary of America’s 2003 invasion of Iraq (p.145). While the countries selected for the questionnaire make perfect sense, a little more discussion on how they were chosen and what allowances might need to be made applying this study to other nations would have strengthened the study as well.

That said, this study will provide a valuable resource for any scholar hoping to understand the impact of unconventional warfare on modern soldiers. The English-language literature, as noted earlier, is heavily biased in favour of the United States and Great Britain, with a consequent bias towards great power perspectives. This work gives scholars a better understanding of the role of medium-sized powers in global affairs. Furthermore, studies from an American perspective tend to put the United States at the centre of discussion, with other nations’ forces in the periphery. This work enhances our understanding of the experiences of multinational forces, and the difficulties inherent in managing such forces. Finally, the interdisciplinary character of this work gives a broad perspective on the nature of combat in asymmetric environments and its impact on combatants, allowing readers to reach a better understanding of how to equip such forces for future deployments.

As an academic tool for understanding the experiences and perceptions of modern military operations, this work is immensely valuable. However, the authors intend for it to offer practical insights for policy-makers, and their recommendations based on their

research should make a significant contribution to politicians and military leaders willing to engage with the work. Caforio concludes the book by listing a series of “*lessons learned*” as a result of the study which he urges military and political leaders to consider. His recommendations include calls for better training and education about the cultures one will encounter on the mission, as well as ongoing “*in-the-field learning during the mission*” (p.401). Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of widespread knowledge of English, enabling communication among soldiers of different nationalities. Finally, governments sending troops on these types of missions should take a greater interest in helping veterans reintegrate into their societies and families upon return. Caforio might have made more of this last point. While the success of missions is essential, in an era of social media and 24 hour news cycles, soldiers and those considering careers in the military are all too aware of the psychological toll of deployment. Unless countries are willing to proactively aid veterans in adjusting to life after deployment, they will have difficulty maintaining morale and attracting skilled, motivated soldiers. Caforio and company do an excellent job recognizing the reality of the emotional and psychological strain of service in asymmetric warfare, but they offer less insight into confronting these problems than they do with preparation and actual deployment.

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