

## **Military Leader Discussion Guide**

(Written by Captain Jaron Wharton, U.S. Army)

While there is no shortage of first-hand accounts of combat experience, Craig M. Mullaney's book, *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education*, is one of the finest accounts of how a young man educated and trained at West Point, Ranger School, and Oxford University, overcame a multitude of personal challenges to fight and win in combat.

For current and aspiring military leaders there are countless themes echoed throughout the narrative that can better prepare them for their own careers.

Mullaney's education was augmented by professional self-study. He surrounded himself with mentors and continued the study of his craft. In describing his initial education at West Point, Mullaney states that he was most eager to learn from the military memoirs of wars past in an attempt to answer several questions. In exploring those questions, he was candid about his own personal challenges, actively seeking to better himself.

As Mullaney went back to teach at the Naval Academy, his students were eager for a combat veteran to answer the same questions he sought at their age. His journey had come full circle: "Were you ready?"

### ***Discussion Questions***

#### ***General***

1. What was war like for the various leaders described in the book—Worthan, Wille, Mullaney, "Chris," Story, Grenz?
2. Were the leaders ever afraid and was this okay?
3. Do you believe your education and training has prepared you for combat?
4. How do you know how you will handle combat?
5. Was there anything a soldier could do to make his war any more or less horrible?
6. How can you deal with having a casualty and the effect it has on your unit?
7. How did Mullaney's unit deal with casualties?
8. What did Mullaney mean by saying "leadership was a damned lonely place?"
9. Throughout the story, Mullaney offers descriptive accounts of attempts to fit in to a "foreign culture" from Beast Barracks at USMA to his father's struggles during an Oxford visit. During his time in Afghanistan, Mullaney offers that he felt almost alien, "Greetings. We are from Planet America. We are here to help you." How do you think you will be perceived abroad as an American soldier?

10. Did Mullaney's actions and mindset lend credence to Colonel LoFaro's "price of a salute?"

"What you know for certain is that it will be chaotic and loud, and you'll be ready to piss in your boots. You'll be more scared of letting down your men than anything the enemy's gonna do to you. And then you'll lead from instinct and judgment. *That's the price of a salute.*" -Colonel Guy LoFaro

As Mullaney reflects, "my part of the contract, the responsibility that came with the privilege of leadership, was never to spend their lives cheaply. I carried the weight of that responsibility on every patrol, yet unlike a rucksack or a Kevlar helmet, I could never slip it off when we came back inside the wire. It was there when I woke up at midnight to check how they were faring in their lonely guard towers. It was there when I walked through their tent that night and when I returned to my cot for a night of restless sleep, turning every hour on a narrow cot. *This was the price of a salute.*"

11. Mullaney describes the importance of several relationships throughout the book that are important for Army officers—senior-to-subordinate, subordinate-to-senior, and peer-to-peer. How do you imagine your interaction to be with your Battalion Commander, Company Commander, Platoon Sergeant and soldiers? What other relationships are important to build within a unit (Sergeant Major, First Sergeant, etc)?
12. Mullaney describes a common fear for young Lieutenants—not having a good Platoon Sergeant. How do you think you would deal with this scenario? How can you tell if you have a good or bad Platoon Sergeant?
13. "He wasn't about to let some rookie lieutenant hurt his men on the next deployment. To him, my success meant the platoon's success." For Squad Leaders and Platoon Sergeants, reflecting upon the successes and failures of Mullaney's platoon, how do you think you could best incorporate a new Platoon Leader?
14. How does moving in mountainous terrain, or for that matter various types of terrain, affect unit movement? How does it affect communications? What about response times for quick reactions forces?

***Chapter 2 "Beast"--"I'm still not sure that I'm the kind of officer they need. I'm not as gung ho as everyone else."***

1. As Cadet Mullaney contemplates the tension between his religious convictions and killing, he seeks advice from a Catholic Chaplain who states, "You might also find that leading men in combat has more to do with duty than bravado." What do you think he meant?

**Chapter 9 “Mountain Men”--“Use the mountains or they will use you.”**

1. During Ranger School, Gunnery Sergeant Oakes drilled in the soldiers’ minds to incorporate flexibility in planning efforts for when conditions changed. What were some of the methods that Oakes used to make the training more realistic?

**Chapter 29 “The Unforgiving Minute”--“What do we do now, sir?”**

1. During the fight on Losano Ridge, was Mullaney correct to stay where he did? How would you have acted?

“This was the minute all of my training had prepared me for. As rounds whipsawed past me and spit up gravel, I had to decide whether to follow Worthan down the hill into the ambush or to stand my ground and coordinate the Humvees’ heavy machine-gun fire. By doctrine I needed to be wherever I could best influence the fight. *But where was that?* As I stood, a trio of bullets ricocheted off the adjacent Humvee. I pivoted back toward the Humvee. I would make my stand on Losano Ridge. That decision, made in seconds, would later replay in my head a thousand times.”

**Chapter 33 “Redemption”--“Sir! It’s your fight.”**

1. Considering the following excerpt, what questions would you have asked the company commander, Captain Worthan?

“Captain Worthan grabbed my shoulder and updated me. ‘Second Platoon has been taking fire from Losano Ridge. They took a couple of casualties, but things are under control now. They’ve been hammering the ridge with artillery and mortars. You’re going to clear the area where they think the fire is coming from to see if anyone survived our artillery barrage.’ I tried in vain to follow my map as he spoke. ‘Any questions?’ I didn’t even know where to start.”

2. Was Mullaney correct to stay where he did during this battle? How would you have acted?
3. How did the three dimensional battlefield affect the operations of Spearhead Platoon during the second fight? Especially consider the use of A-10s, AH-64s, mortars, artillery, the MEDEVAC helicopter, and discuss REDs (risk estimated distances).
4. Mullaney states that he felt much more prepared for the second fight, directly attributed to training he did with his platoon after the first fight. While deployed, this can pose a serious challenge to small unit leaders especially when attempting to balance operational tempo. How important do you think training during combat operations is and what type of training do you think you can do?

**Note**

*This is an evolving set of questions. If you or your group has suggestions for additional questions*

*to include, please email [craig@craigmmullaney.com](mailto:craig@craigmmullaney.com) with the subject line: [Leadership Questions].*