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Book Review: The Good Captain: A Personal Memoir of America at War

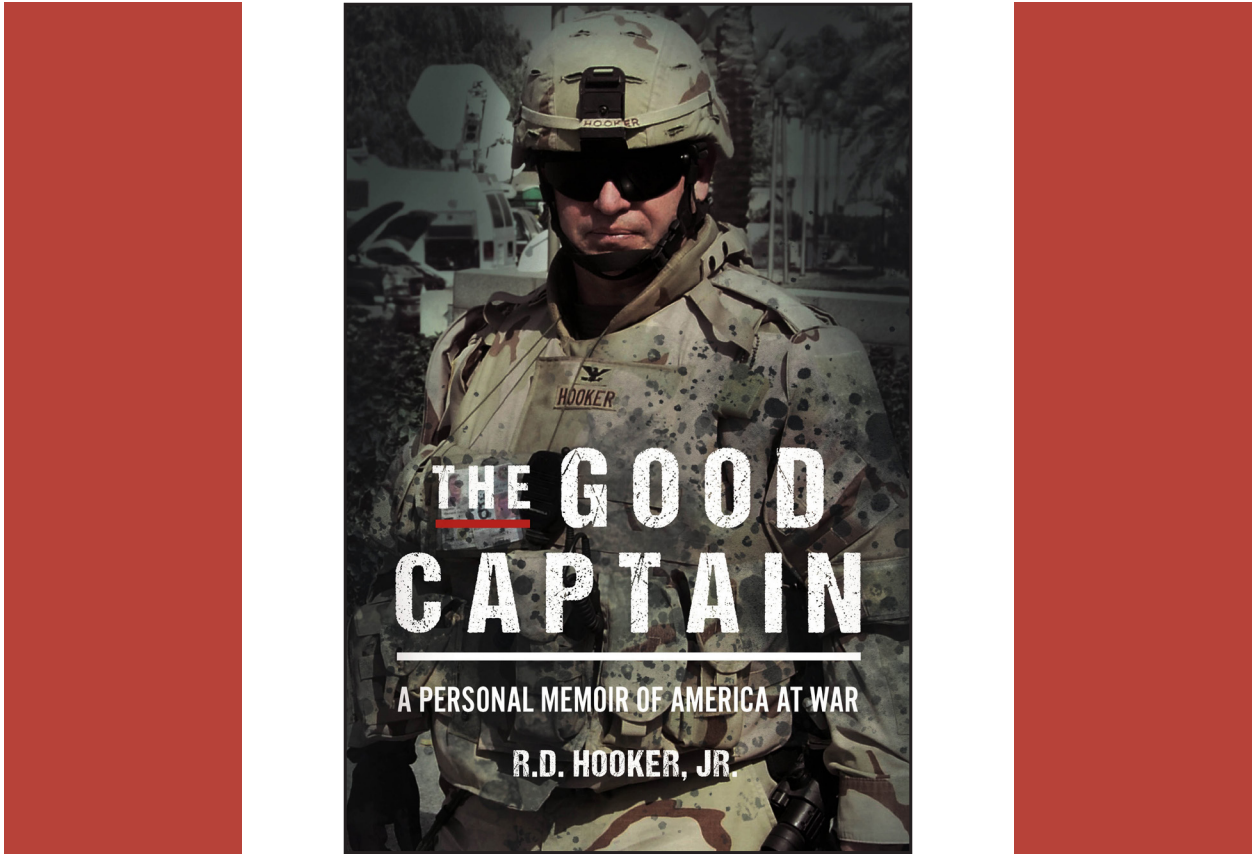
Joseph J. Collins

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Reviewed by Joseph J. Collins, PhD, retired US Army colonel

Retired Army colonel Rich Hooker's *The Good Captain* is a superb memoir and tale well told, providing a history of the Cold War and the global war on terrorism. Military officers will gain tips on command through the book's interesting war stories and revealing anecdotes from service in the field and in the White House. Civilians should read this book as a guide to understanding military service in an era of crises, interventions, and wars great and small.

The author is a United States Military Academy graduate, a second-generation paratrooper, and an experienced policy professional. He honed his analytical skills with a doctorate of philosophy from the University of Virginia and then taught at West Point. He served a few tours

in the Pentagon and multiple tours on the National Security Council staff. These assignments were the flip side of his career as a commander of airborne units, from platoon to brigade.

Hooker's deployments take up the bulk of this book. The list is impressive, including Grenada with the 82nd Airborne Division, Somalia to work with the legendary Ambassador Robert B. Oakley, Zaire to coordinate humanitarian operations in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo as a parachute infantry battalion commander, the Sinai Peninsula for peacekeeping operations, command of the Dragon Brigade in Iraq and, in his last year of service, Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne Division.

In all of Hooker's deployments, the themes were repetitive, and the operations were multinational. The

forces of evil were ever present, complicating each mission. High degrees of danger accompanied even the most mundane deployments. The paratroopers endured daily hardships but never faltered. Families waited at home, counting the minutes until their soldiers returned.

Bureaucratic politics and uncertain results complicated each mission. Talented officers and dedicated sergeants cut through the red tape, ensuring the soldiers were cared for and that the mission accomplished. Senior officers, some named and others anonymous, lived up to their reputation—or did not. In nearly all cases, the application of US force calmed the waters but never solved the underlying problems. American forces were never outfought but were often outlasted.

The final 100 pages of the memoir concern Iraq and Afghanistan. They are the most revealing in the book and are full of lessons for the future. The Iraq section was doubly interesting because Hooker first worked that problem as a combat brigade commander and, after rotating home, as director for Iraq on the National Security Council staff during the run-up to the surge there. His description of the politics of the high command bears close examination.

Service is its own reward, but in the armed forces—especially in a decade of war—it is rare that things turn out as planned in Washington. Hooker concludes his excellent memoir with this thoughtful observation:

In both wars, we faced two insurmountable problems. We had tied ourselves to host nation governments whose incapacity and corruption were prime drivers of the conflict, and despite enormous efforts, we could not fix them. And we faced an enemy who fought from sanctuary with the most powerful weapon of all—time. Eventually, the American public and our allies lost faith and began to waver. We had made the same mistake in Vietnam. But we had not learned.

For Hooker, the “good captain” of this tale, it was enough to answer the nation’s call. As his friend, Lieutenant General Ricky Waddell, noted on the first page of the book, “We are sworn officers of the Republic. When asked to serve, we serve.” This memoir is one of soldiers, service, and sacrifice. Those ideals were passed down to Hooker from his father, and he passed them to his sons. Their families support their devotion to duty. The nation is blessed to have their service in the past, the present, and the future.

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