

Reborn on the Fourth of July: The Challenge of Faith, Patriotism & Conscience

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The Calm Before the Storm

Just after midnight, we got a distress call from another one of the units from our Forward Operating Base (FOB). There had been a vehicular accident in a convoy headed back to base; a driver had rolled over an embankment above a reservoir.

Our Humvees roared to life and we booked it to the coordinates supplied by the medics. Our group of about twenty was the first to arrive on the scene, so we pulled into a perimeter with the vehicles from the original convoy. Half of the rolled vehicle, a Humvee that sat two in the cab up front and six in the open bed in back, was resting above the water inside a concrete enclosed reservoir. There were nine people in the back and three in the cab when the vehicle tumbled down about twenty feet to where it rested. Soldiers surrounded the wreckage, working to free the men in the cab.

The platoon leader, platoon sergeant, squad leaders, medic and I made our way down a mound that surrounded the site. As I carefully walked down the rock-strewn hill, past a medevac vehicle with its internal lights on, I saw a man inside being treated for a head wound. His entire face was covered in blood. Small droplets of bright red jumped from his lips and splattered the medic's face. I remember it in slow motion, like in the movies. I'll never forget it.

As we continued down the short incline to the reservoir, we heard someone shriek, "I need swimmers to search the water!" At that, my pace quickened. I was one of the few men in my platoon who knew how to swim well; before we deployed, I had been encouraged to enroll in the selective Navy Diver course at Pearl Harbor. My unit knew I surfed regularly on the North Shore, a place where waves could get hairy. If there were anyone who could be trusted to search the water, it would be me.

The temperature was in the fifties on land, and I suspected the water was even colder. The concrete barrier was at least four feet above the surface of the water, so while I could get myself in the water, I would need to be hauled back up. I made sure there would be a constant presence that I could call on to grab me before I took off my boots and body armor, and I plunged in.



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Logan Mehl-Laituri is an army veteran. He served in the Iraq War as a forward observer/fire support specialist before applying to change his status to conscientious objector. After his discharge he went to Palestine with Christian Peacemaker Teams, and later returned to Iraq with Shane Claiborne for the documentary film *The Gospel of Rutba*. He speaks and writes broadly about issues related to veterans and Christian perspectives on militarism and nationalism.

It was much colder than I expected. My breath escaped my lungs as I hit the water, and I gasped for relief and air as soon as I resurfaced. I tried to stay clear of what looked to be the rest of the dam and began to dip intermittently underwater, pointing my toes and hoping to hit the bottom of the reservoir—or a body. I was never so scared in my life—not of getting hurt or drowning but of having to retrieve a lifeless body from the frigid and foreboding waters. I prayed over and over to God that my search would be in vain.

Ancient communities once depicted hell not as fiery but frigid. The devil, being far from God and the celestial bodies like the sun, was blue and cold. Dante describes one of the lowest levels of Satan’s inferno as a frostscape, with whole bodies suspended in ice. Their heads alone remained above the surface for Virgil and his companion to stub and kick. I couldn’t help but feel a bit like Dante, descending to a frigid hell in the fearful hope of finding friends to drag back to the surface.

From the water, beneath the truck, I could see the person that most of the rescue effort was aimed toward. A sergeant had landed on the concrete wall of the reservoir before the vehicle did. His left leg was bent at an impossible angle, pinned by the weight of the Humvee. He had already been put on morphine and was muttering incoherently, whispering either sweet nothings or frantic pleas to his invisible wife. I couldn’t bear to see his leg twisted well past its limits; the image of a layer of blood painting the concrete below him assaults my mind occasionally, and I cringe at every invasive thought.

The five minutes I spent in the water passed at a glacial pace. Eventually, the call was made that everyone was accounted for. I made my way toward the edge of the reservoir, but I couldn’t lift my arms high enough for my friends to grab hold. It took a man on each of my arms to finally drag me out of the water. Nobody had been lost. I was left blessedly empty-handed and with a supreme sense of accomplishment. I had done well; I had contributed to a successful rescue mission and faced a challenge few others in my platoon were able to. I was a good man, a selfless servant. I thought the worst was over, but I was wrong again.

Combat can be explained and retold by any number of fellow combatants—the blood and gore, the anxious anticipation of explosions and bullets, the



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CUT

BOOK EXCERPT

“Soon everything holding me in place . . . would fracture and break, sending me on a foreboding trajectory into unknown territory.”




overwhelming boredom between missions. All of it in some way is translatable by others in the martial fraternity. But none of the glamorous depictions and romantic sentimentality we put on war could prepare me for what came after the rescue of that cold November night.

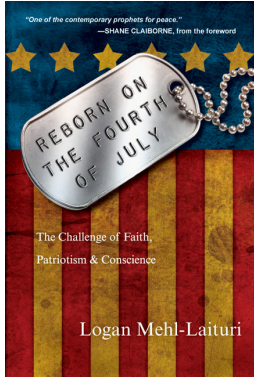
Up until the rescue mission, I was more or less caught up in the generic feelings of patriotism that crystallized around the time I entered the military. I wasn't rampantly patriotic, but I also had no problem with conducting violence on behalf of freedom, democracy or America itself. I was a suspended pendulum, sitting comfortably on the patriotic side of the war and peace spectrum. Soon everything holding me in place, all the cultural and political assumptions I didn't even know I held, would fracture and break, sending me on a foreboding trajectory into unknown territory.

—From Movement One, “Rescue Mission”



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Why did you decide to share your story in *Reborn on the Fourth of July*?

Logan: Stories have power to redeem or destroy. The stories that dominate the broader narratives for soldiers are mostly destructive. We are trained to kill and to experience profound suffering, and the inevitability with which we talk about war leaves little room for hope. When I listen to other veterans, many of their stories are filled with anger and betrayal—at the enemy, but also at the government, their churches or even themselves. I too am angry, but anger is not a reliable theological lens. Despite my anger, “doing” church calls me to faith, hope and love. *I wrote this book in faith, with love, as an exercise in hope.* “Success” for me will be measured in the number and health of other war-weary warriors stepping out in faith to share their own stories, to interpret their lives more in light of the Prince of Peace than the gods of war.

How do you approach the difficult topic of war and faith?

Logan: Instead of theology from the sidelines, my approach is necessarily one that is heavily invested in the nitty-gritty reality of combat. I try to be honest about the tragedy in war, but also the beauty we catch glimpses of therein and the hope that we find in Jesus. I insist that to deal holistically with war, we must not abstract it from the lived experience thereof. The most important way to learn about war is to hear real accounts of it, accounts that may very well be grotesque. Only after we grapple tangibly and viscerally with the reality of war will we be able to take comfort in the fact that Jesus has saved us, that war is in fact over, if we’ll have it. In short, my purpose is to describe the rebirth that occurred in one soldier’s life and what is possible in the lives of others, soldiers or otherwise. The military is one way in which to understand the great and abiding joy made possible by the horrific and obscene reality of the cross.

What is your hope for *Reborn on the Fourth of July*?

Logan: The need I am addressing is the lack of firsthand hope-filled tales of contemporary combat that deal seriously with the cruel reality of evil in war. Churches have no lexicon through which to narrate war for those in their congregations who have suffered therein as perpetrators of collective violence. The acts soldiers commit are not their own, but they are tragically forced to interpret and internalize them without much meaningful



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Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW



Logan Mehl-Laituri, a military veteran and author of *Reborn on the Fourth of July*, recounts his own struggles after returning from Iraq. Through Logan's story you learn the real cost of war to military personnel, the real challenges to Christians that are raised by military service on and even off the battlefield, and the real questions that each of us must wrestle with as we hold in tension our love of country with God's love for the world.

guidance from religious leaders. There is a moral dyslexia about war that multiplies the suffering our military members endure. With this book, I hope to advance the frontlines of a new and growing space within which we might better process the reality of war through a uniquely Christian lens. More than just an altar call for the church to change the way it speaks of war, this book is a rallying cry for soldier saints, young and old, to muster the courage and strength to share their difficult but valuable experiences for their own good and the good of the church universal.

What do you want readers to take away from *Reborn on the Fourth of July*?

Logan:

- Veterans and military are not strictly “hero” or “villain,” but human. We must not lean so heavily on stereotypes of them as either a monster or a hero. Readers must see the complex character of military formation and practice in order to fully appreciate and “support” the troops. Soldiers are humans, capable of good as well as evil.
- The Bible is not uniform in its depiction of war; it is diverse and multivocal. Soldiering is complicated within the Christian canon; some centurions are celebrated and others are castigated. I try to incorporate Scripture to support both depictions so that readers are challenged to think more critically about the character of Christian soldiers, ancient and contemporary. I also want to register the centrality of Scripture for shaping our understanding of not just war, but those who fight therein.
- The issue of military and national service affects *everyone*. Underneath the talk of military service is really the conversation about national identity. When churches identify too much with America, they lose their Christian saltiness. On the other hand, when churches identify too much with antiwar sentiments, they often lose their ability to sympathize with, or speak credibly to, this very unique and suffering segment of our population.
- Looking more critically at military formation and cohesion can inform the church and improve its witness. The military teaches the virtues of loyalty and requires courage. The methods and intensity of initial training reflect ancient catechesis. There is a baby in the



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bathwater of military service that we need to be careful not to toss out. Ron Sider had a point when he asked how compelling the church might be if it were to focus as much energy and resources on Christian formation as the U.S. military does on boot camp.

- We need to “de-fang” polemical discourse on war and peace, to not fall so easily into “patriot” or “pacifist” camps—we need patriotic pacifists *and* conscientious participants. Putting God above country will look different; it’s the understanding that the cross must be *more* constitutive than the flag, but the flag *does* have a proper, subordinate place in our lives. Following Jesus while honoring the political order that crucified him will feel upside down, like going to war without a weapon, but it is something we must be able to envision.
- That there is a conversation waiting to happen upon which real lives rely; soldiers, veterans and their families need churches actively engaging in more compassionate dialogue about faith and service. Though I wrote the book fueled by anger and disappointment, I tried to remain honest in interpreting my military experience in Christian terms. I hope doing so illustrates that love really does triumph, that God truly does seek to reconcile all things.



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