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BOOKS: 'Shadow of the Sword'

James C. Roberts

SHADOW OF THE SWORD: A MARINE'S JOURNEY OF WAR, HEROISM AND REDEMPTION

By Jeremiah Workman with John R. Bruning

Presidio Press, \$26, 272 pages

REVIEWED BY JAMES C. ROBERTS

Marine Staff Sgt. Jeremiah Workman's "Shadow of the Sword" is the story of two battles.

The first battle was intense, but, compared to the second, relatively brief. On Dec. 23, 2004, during the Battle of Fallujah, then-Cpl. Workman's platoon came upon a house occupied by 40 heavily armed insurgents.

Five of the Marines climbed the stairs to the second floor and were immediately pinned down by superior forces. Workman led his squad in three separate assaults to rescue the five trapped Marines, repeatedly exposing himself to enemy fire during the hours-long battle. In his second assault, he was seriously wounded by an enemy grenade that left his arms and legs lacerated by shrapnel. Despite his wounds, Workman led a third attack. Here is how he describes his situation after hours of battling the insurgents:

"I feel myself falling down the stairs. I hit a step two or three above the landing, unable to breathe. A sudden onrush of smoke fills the landing. Everything flammable now burns with a hellish glow. It casts crazy shadows through the smoke. ... "Allah Akbar!" An insurgent's victory cry. Where's my weapon? I still can't breathe. My lungs feel compressed, like a balloon a child has squeezed hard and drained of all helium. ...

"I try to get to my feet, but I slip and fall. I have no balance. I'm reduced to crawling on my hands and knees. I tumble to the landing and sprawl chin-first into the broken glass under the window. ...

"The shouting fades until it merges with the sound of my heartbeat in my ear. ... Like a dream, a scream pierces the background noise. They're coming for you, Jeremiah. ... I try to breathe but my muscles refuse to work. I'm suffocating. The last of my strength starts to flow away. ... I'm left in darkness now, unable to even gasp for air ... Finish this. Get up there and die as you intended. Don't let them shoot you like a dog, on all fours ... my cammies are torn and blackened. My hands and arms are slick with blood. The hum of background noise becomes a staccato melody of gunfire. I listen to it, unable to find the will to move, unsure if I am even conscious. ... Am I dying?... Consciousness slips away like a ship in its death throes. A wave cascades over me. I feel loose, adrift. Free. I float away into the blackness."

Exhausted and only semi-coherent at this point, Workman was dragged from the building by a Marine officer. Workman's efforts contributed to the elimination of 24 jihadists, and his heroic actions saved two of the five trapped Marines, but three were killed.

In recognition of his heroic action, Cpl. Workman was awarded the Navy Cross, the nation's second highest award for valor.

Although celebrated in the Marine Corps, in his hometown and indeed nationally as a hero, Cpl. (now Sgt.) Workman was engaged in a second, desperate battle, however. The enemy this time was as lethal in its own corrosive way as the jihadists he had faced in Fallujah — post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is a battle that continues to this day, almost five years later.

Much of the book is a brutally honest account of Workman's daily struggle against this insidious disorder which, as the author reveals, has destroyed or crippled the lives of hundreds of thousands of combat veterans of America's wars.

In the aftermath of the battle of Fallujah, the specter of the three dead buddies he was unable to save came to haunt Workman, causing first nightmares, then persistent insomnia, anxiety and depression. He resorted to self medication with alcohol, then prescription drugs, including the powerful sedative Clonopin, that enabled him to sleep but left him groggy and dazed much of the time.

Workman became subject to wild mood swings when the Clonopin wore off, going from passivity to wild rages. He was relieved of his duties as a drill instructor and was ostracized by fellow Marines. His pregnant wife, traumatized and exasperated by the ordeal their marriage had become, left him.

Then, on a cross-country heroes bus tour with Vets for Freedom, Workman discovered that many of his fellow heroes were suffering from PTSD as well.

His feelings of isolation lessened, he sought counseling and focused on saving his marriage and becoming a dad to the son he had fathered. With enormous effort, he broke his dependence on Clonopin and gradually got control of his anger. He and his wife began talking on the phone with increasing frequency and they eventually confessed that they still loved each other.

The story has a happy ending, at least provisionally. Jeremiah and his wife, Jessica, have reunited and he dotes on his son, Devon. He has an associate college degree (the first in his family to achieve this) and hopes to have his bachelor's degree in two years.

Professionally, things are going well for Workman as well. He has been assigned to work with a program at the at Marine Corps base in Quantico, Va., that treats injured Marines including those suffering from PTSD. He has become an expert on the disorder and the statistics he cites are astonishing.

Workman notes that 25,000 World War II veterans are still being treated for PTSD, 65 years after the war's end. Thirty percent of Korean War combat veterans continue to suffer from PTSD and almost 500,000 Vietnam War veterans — 30 percent of those who saw combat — were affected by PTSD.

"For a shocking number of our veterans," Workman writes, "The wars they fought never ended. Never."

The percentages for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are even worse. Workman reports that approximately 300,000 of the veterans of these conflicts suffer from PTSD or major depression while another 320,000 have suffered from traumatic brain injuries that often cause symptoms akin to those of PTSD.

The military had prepared to treat only 8,000 cases, however, rather than the almost 700,000 cases that actually resulted. As a result, the system was overwhelmed, with the VA reporting 600,000 unprocessed claims at one point. That situation, fortunately, has improved dramatically as a result of a policy change at the top. The military has dramatically expanded its treatment program for PTSD and aggressively encourages those who have the symptoms to seek treatment. The Marine Corps has adopted an official policy that no Marine suffering from PTSD will be denied a promotion because of it.

Still, Workman notes, because of the stigma of PTSD, an estimated 60 percent of PTSD sufferers decline to seek help, insisting on fighting "the shadow war" in solitude, in many cases self-medicating themselves with drugs and alcohol. Workman's mission is to battle this stigma by speaking about PTSD around the country — and by writing this book.

"They called me a hero, and yet, I needed help," he writes, hoping by his candor to encourage others suffering from PTSD to come out of the shadows. Despite his struggles, however, he refuses to succumb to victim status. He has no use for political correctness, is a staunch defender of the U.S. mission in Iraq and Afghanistan and is proud of his service in the Marine Corps and would do it again.

The way to deal with PTSD, he shows, is to acknowledge the problem and confront it.

For Jeremiah Workman, the battle against PTSD continues on a daily basis, yet he is optimistic about the long-term outcome, made more determined by the love for his wife and son.

At the end of the book, he recalls kissing his infant son on the forehead and vowing, "I will never give up the fight, Devon. That's my promise to you."

Then he adds, "I follow my son into a deep and comforting sleep."

- *James C. Roberts is president of the American Veterans Center.*

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