



One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War

Francis J. "Bing" West Jr.

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Battalion 3/5 suffered the highest number of casualties in the war in Afghanistan. This is the story of one platoon in that distinguished battalion.

Aware of U.S. plans to withdraw from the country, knowing their efforts were only a footprint in the sand, the fifty Marines of 3rd Platoon fought in Sangin, the most dangerous district in all of Afghanistan. So heavy were the casualties that the Secretary of Defense offered to pull the Marines out. Instead, they pushed forward. Each Marine in 3rd Platoon patrolled two and a half miles a day for six months—a total of one million steps—in search of a ghostlike enemy that struck without warning. Why did the Marines attack and attack, day after day?

Every day brought a new skirmish. Each footfall might trigger an IED. Half the Marines in 3rd Platoon didn't make it intact to the end of the tour. *One Million Steps* is the story of the fifty brave men who faced these grim odds and refused to back down. Based on Bing West's embeds with 3rd Platoon, as well as on their handwritten log, this is a gripping grunt's-eye view of life on the front lines of America's longest war. Writing with a combat veteran's compassion for the fallen, West also offers a damning critique of the higher-ups who expected our warriors to act as nation-builders—and whose failed strategy put American lives at unnecessary risk.

Each time a leader was struck down, another rose up to take his place. How does one man instill courage in another? What welded these men together as firmly as steel plates?

This remarkable book is the story of warriors caught between a maddening, unrealistic strategy and their unswerving commitment to the fight. Fearsome, inspiring, and poignant in its telling, *One Million Steps* is sure to become a classic, a unique and enduring testament to the American warrior spirit.

Praise for *One Million Steps*

"West shows the reality of modern warfare in a way that is utterly gripping."—**Max Boot, author of *Invisible Armies***

"A gripping, boot-level account of Marines in Afghanistan during the bloody struggle with Taliban fighters."—***Los Angeles Times***

"*One Million Steps* transcends combat narrative: It is an epic of contemporary small-unit combat."—**Eliot A. Cohen, author of *Supreme Command***

"A blistering assault on America's senior military leadership."—***The Wall Street Journal***

"A heart-pounding portrayal . . . a compelling account of what these men endured."—***The Washington Post***

"Stunning, sobering, and brilliantly written."—**Newt Gingrich**

"One of the most intrepid military journalists, Bing West, delivers a heart-wrenching account of one

platoon's fight."—**Bill Bennett, host of *Morning in America***

"Bing West has reconfirmed his standing as one of the most intrepid and insightful observers of America's wars. . . . *One Million Steps* reveals the essence of small-unit combat, the very soul of war."—***The Weekly Standard***

"A searing read, but it is one that all Americans should undertake. We send our sons into battle, and few know what our warriors experience." —***The Washington Times***

One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War Details

Date : Published September 9th 2014 by Random House (first published January 1st 2014)

ISBN : 9781400068746

Author : Francis J. "Bing" West Jr.

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : War, Military Fiction, Nonfiction, History, Military, Military History



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From Reader Review One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War for online ebook

Cedric says

Good book, fast read. Difficult content, but should be ready by anyone that wants to understand what some Marines went through in the Sangin district of Helmand province. Written by a Vietnam combat vet who went on many patrols with K company of the 3/5. He tells their story, drawing parallels with his own experience on patrol in Vietnam. Sangin is an area of fertile poppy farmland approximately 15 kilometers by 4 kilometers where most of the farmers make \$200 per year.

In under two years that area produced over 50 Marines KIA, and over 500 amputees, that's more than half a battalion. According to the book, the larger mission was to take and secure the area from the Taliban so that a new generator could be installed in a nearby damn - that mission was abandoned but the Marines remained to draw out and eliminate the enemy.

Favorite quotes: "Our basic mistake was handing over freedom as a gift and doing the fighting for others. Our intention was good; our wisdom was bad". "No nation should ever go to war without the will to defeat the enemy."

Randall says

I took a long time to finish this book because I referred to other battles mentioned by West to gain perspective on Sangin. We are of course all moving through history although we rarely perceive it directly. Major events can sharpen the focus - everyone remembers where they were on 9/11 - and yet every day we are living in remarkable times. 3/5 lived in and make history and yet were unaware of it and cut off from the rest of the world. On one hand they were ordinary, living and making war like so many Marines before them, and yet doing so in a new and unique way. Being such a pissant insignificant place, one might think that history will forget Sangin and the extraordinary men who fought and died there, although because of Bing West perhaps not. How fitting that one old grunt would memorialize these new grunts. Thank you for your service to our country, men of 3/5.

Craig Fiebig says

This book deserves to be read, especially by those confused over the 'War without tears' platitudes of the COIN religion.

Christina says

What a privilege to have this book written. I'm one of the sisters of Lcpl James Boelk. I'm so grateful to have the story of 3rd platoon put into history. The book talks about David Boelk's (my Dad) phone ringing moments after he read a report about Marines who were killed, I was the one on the other side of the line. I

read the book in less than a day. Although I had heard some of the details differently I thought it was a great read considering there are always different perspectives in combat situations. I truly can't express how grateful I am to have an entire book dedicated to the men who were my brother's Marine Corps family. Thank you Bing West for putting your life on the line to make sure their story was recorded and preserved! This will be a book we hand down through generations. Thanks to you our grandchildren won't stumble across something about my brother and forever wonder what his platoon did and who he fought with. "So long as we are not forgotten we do not die" -author unknown. Bing West gave 3rd platoon the gift of immortality.

Mustang USMC says

Mr. West has presented us with an exceptional book; it is one I would recommend to every single American who still loves their country (noting that many no longer do). What leaps at you from almost every page is the cost of making poor choices in national leadership at the voting booth.

It is hard to imagine a president nonchalant about the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. It is difficult to imagine that a Secretary of Defense is clueless about an appropriate strategy inside a war zone. It numbs the mind to learn that while our troops are dying, our three, and four-star officers focus on implementing a progressive theory to save the Taliban from himself.

Throughout this period of political malfeasance, the Marines of 3/5 distinguished themselves, as individuals and brought great credit upon the finest fighting force in the world today. Third platoon survived; they excelled in defeating a determined enemy —not because of Defense leadership, but in spite of it. I believe that this book is mandatory reading among those of us who still love America because it teaches us that there are consequences to the decisions we make at the voting booth.

T. Fowler says

This is a very good book that throws a clear light on the type of combat that a platoon of US Marines faced in Helmand Province from October 2010 to March 2011. Bing West, who fought with the Marines in Vietnam, shows that he is still, and always will be, a dedicated Marine as he describes the brutal daily combat that Kilo Company endured. That dedication certainly biases his praise for these men but, having been a Marine, that allows him to be accepted by these men and he then has the ability to describe the daily combat of each squad in a way that no other author probably could.

It is significant that the brutal daily combat of this tour resulted in the battalion (3/5 Marines) having the highest number of casualties of the war in Afghanistan. Because he was embedded with the platoon at times and also had access to diaries kept by the men, Bing has useful insights on the extraordinary courage and determination that they showed facing daily firefights and IEDs. At the same time, Bing has little sympathy with the generals who directed the war and their COIN strategy, leaving an air of hopelessness for the future of Afghanistan, and providing no insight if this war could have ever been successful.

The book provides an interesting contrast regarding combat in Afghanistan if compared to Jake Tapper's

book, *The Outpost*, which describes the struggle in mountainous Eastern Afghanistan as opposed to the flat opium fields of Helmand. Both books should be read by anyone seeking to understand this conflict.

Jeremy Dobbins says

As a Marine Corps Infantry Rifleman who fought in Marjah, Afghanistan I could relate all to well with this gripping account. Depressingly honest the author unflinchingly portrays what Afghanistan was like and what it means to the men who fought, killed and died in her poppy fields. The author being a veteran of the Marine Corps infantry himself, and having fought in Vietnam, gives an account on our nations war in Afghanistan that every citizen should read.

Mark Fallon says

Who's the best person to embed with a platoon of Marine grunts? A Marine grunt - Bing West. Vietnam veteran and combat journalist.

West narrates the story of 3rd Platoon of Battalion 3/5 as they patrol the area around Sangin, the most dangerous district in Afghanistan. Each day brings injuries, lost limbs and death. Yet still, 3rd Platoon goes out on their daily patrol, intent on engaging and defeating the Taliban.

As much as the book honors the Marines, it's an indictment on the political and senior military leadership. Both Bush and Obama failed to understand what it would take to achieve even a semblance of victory in Afghanistan, and the generals didn't fare too well either.

Steve says

This Bing West-penned history of one U.S. Marine platoon at war could very well have been titled "Body Count." Not because the Third Platoon in Kilo Company of the Third Battalion of the Fifth Marine Regiment racked up so many enemy kills within Afghanistan. (At one point in America's longest war, its commanding general, Stanley McChrystal "directed all units to cease reporting insurgents killed.") In one month of fighting in the Sangin district, the Third Battalion "suffered fifteen dead, forty amputations and over seventy others wounded." As author West reports, "On average, a battalion in Afghanistan lost one man a month, (the) 3/5 had lost twenty in two months." The bodies being counted in that "most dangerous district in all of Afghanistan" belonged to American Marines.

Bing West is not your average arm-chair, wannabe soldier-writer. As a college graduate, West served as a combat Marine in the jungles of Vietnam. The former assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration went on hundreds of reconnaissance patrols not only in Vietnam but Iraq and Afghanistan. To write this his sixth and last book about American combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, West embedded with the Third Platoon, seeing the carnage close-up.

For any red-white-and-blue American patriot, this is a very frustrating read. Largely because of the rules of engagement our combat troops in Afghanistan were directed to operate under. Can you imagine having to

keep your finger off your trigger until PID or Positive Identification was established? That meant Afghan insurgents had to be carrying a weapon or they had to be talking on the radio in the middle of a firefight before they could be fired upon by American troops. Can you imagine trying to fight a war in which lawyers behind the scenes are directing the action? “In every battalion operations center, (an attorney) monitored all calls for artillery or air support, constantly weighing who might face court-martial or be relieved of command for making a wrong call.” America is always forced to apply those ROEs whenever they get involved in an armed conflict when the enemy combatants wear no uniforms and blend in with the civilian population.

West pulls no punches when pointing fingers at who’s to blame for the American debacle in Afghanistan. The author believes “the war didn’t end because Mr. Obama quit. Al Qaeda and the Taliban remained on the battlefield undefeated.” West feels the decision to remove all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan by 2016 “was the act of a politician, not a statesman.” Simply put, West writes, “Our generals tried to do too much and our commander-in-chief settled for too little.”

How can you win a war when your goal is not to “defeat” but to “diminish” your enemy? Just exactly what does that mean? How can you win a war just by “winning the hearts and minds” of those caught in your cross fire? How can you win a war when friendly persuasion is your weapon? How can you win a war when the doctrine of counterinsurgency replaces coaches with referees? How can you win a war when your top commanders insist “our side plays by their rules while the other side makes up its own rules?” But, West does a good job here of proving “a flawed war policy can coexist with a soldier’s determination to fight for his country.” This 224-page war diary asks and answers the questions, who are the men of the Third Platoon? “What spirit sustained them?”

Pat Appel says

Glad it's over

I'm glad I finally came to the end of this book. Not because I didn't enjoy the story of 3/5 but because it reminded me to much of Vietnam. It was the same bullshit back then with the Rules of Engagement. Marines getting maimed and killed because some clown makes up ROE. Im sick and tired of it. I would like to see some of these politicians tried and imprisoned for allowing this to keep happening. We lost over 58,000 in Vietnam and for what? We learned nothing. In Hue in 68 we had two battalions of artillery eight miles away at Phi Bai and we never got the order to fire on the city. We could of saved many Marines lives. I'm tired of reading stories like this. Semper Fi Brothers.

Tim Bane says

Great book. This is the second book I have read written by Bing West. I enjoyed how Bing balanced his writing when he talked about the overall strategy in Afghanistan and compared it with 3rd Platoon, Kilo Company's 3/5 Marines' actual fight on the ground. 3/5 Marines suffered many casualties from a determined and elusive enemy. Everyday 3rd Platoon went out on patrol. Bing highlighted the the importance of sound tactics in defeating the enemy while maintaining disciplined initiative. Evidence through his writing showed that it was only a matter of time before some of the most devoted Marines were wounded or paid the ultimate

price. The resilient platoon kept on fighting back and began to see the light of their efforts towards the end of their deployment. I highly recommend this book.

John says

A great book. Bing West paints a vivid picture of the stresses and environment the Marines faced. West, a former Marine Infantry Officer in Vietnam embeds with the Marines as they patrol through the staggering humidity, in the frigid cold, through cannelles and in IED laden terrain. West tells the story of 3/5 as only a Marine Combat Veteran can. West illustrates the tenacity shown by the Marines, day after day, step after step in the face of the unrelenting threat of IEDs and the Taliban.

West also speaks to the disparity between strategy at the top, the white house (from victory to the downgrading to 'withdrawal and showing resolve' as a measure of victory), the Generals' Petraeus and McChrystal, (Nation building, winning hearts and minds of a populace who had no loyalty and were duplicitous and a "5%" focus on actually defeating the enemy) and The SecDef (defeating the enemy by combat) who appointed two Commanders that seemingly had contradictory views to his own on the strategy to win the war in Afghanistan. And none of whom actually understood the Marines. Nobody seemed to be on the same sheet of music at the top, and for the most part their views were largely at odds with the pragmatic reality the Marines on the ground faced where 100% of their effort was focused on defeating the enemy in order stay alive and avenge their brothers who were injured or killed.

West does a great job of humanizing and endearing the Marines of 3/5. You find yourself turning the pages with some trepidation hoping that every Marine makes it back from each patrol unscathed. Highly recommended for students of combat, the Marines, or anyone that wants to learn a little bit more about the Marine mentality.

Jerome says

One Million Steps is combat narrative of The day to day life of Marines in Helmand province Afghanistan. Very well written in an interesting way from the prospect of the Grunts who are taking the brunt of what is looking more and more like a lost cause. Bing West, uses his infantry experience in Vietnam as a Marine to great advantage in telling the story of what it's like to go on daily patrols never knowing when you may step on an IED and loose a leg or two or more.

This book is very much like "War" by Sebastian Junger.

Matthew says

West's latest book highlights the strategic failure of US national leadership (President, Secretary of Defense, McChrystal, Petraeus) and the strategic failure of COIN strategy in Afghanistan while simultaneously emphasizing what is best about the US Marine Corps: that there is still a warrior class in America that exists for one purpose - to seek out and destroy the enemy. If you want an authentic treatment of what modern small unit warfare looks like, this is it. For those who circulated the infamous Marine 3/5 'Darkhorse' prayer email, this is the rest of the story of that unit. Bing West, himself a Marine grunt in Vietnam, paints a vivid portrait of what happens at the logical end of the voter's and politician's wishes, at far away places like

Helmand Province and Sangin.

Nick says

Just one word - Outstanding! One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War is one of those rare books succeeding at dropping you on the ground right there with the grunts, in the field feeling the heat of the summer sun - no a/c here, baby - and during the winter the ice cold of the stagnant water in an irrigation trench seeping into your boots; the sweat rolling down your face infused with the stink of stress and mixed with the dust of the fields, dazed from the concussion of an IED wondering whether you've been hit, and making one with the ground as F-18's provide air support danger close - I couldn't put this book down. This is a book about Marine infantry doing what they have been trained to do while examining with a very critical eye the Nation's foreign policy in Afghanistan during the Obama Administration. It's not a pretty picture.

Written by a former Viet Nam combat vet turned author, Bing West has been there, done that and has many filthy, stained, ripped T-shirts - literally - to show for it. He writes from a place of knowing and deep understanding of what it is like to be a grunt - the day-to-day grind, the boredom followed by explosive engagement, observing the locals, hunting for the enemy and always challenged when trying to tell the two apart. Mr. West immerses the reader with 3rd Platoon, Kilo Co, 3/5 Marines as they take on the Taliban in the god forsaken Sangin District, the outback of Helmand Province. As the reader you'll go on the daily patrols from day one and learn with the platoon how to counter Taliban tactics - what works and what doesn't. This was a very different fight from Fallujah of which many of these young Marines were veterans. You'll get to know the individuals within the platoon, their roles and how they perform them. And yes, you'll be there when on an unfortunately regular basis there are causalities - the ugly IED explosions that if survived almost always led to loss of at least one limb. You will gain a true understanding of Marine Corps combined arms and how it is employed, how Marine snipers and engineers were integrated into patrols that increased their effectiveness.

Most of all this is a book about the individuals who make-up the brotherhood of Marines that was and is 3rd Platoon. West's writing is an amazing tribute to these young Marines. The author goes beyond just who they were while serving in Sangin. He records why they joined, the worry and anguish of their families while deployed, their plans for when they return and what really happened with their lives upon return. Mr. West summarizes the characteristics of the platoon at the end of the book utilizing individuals who epitomized each trait, "In summary, 3rd Platoon's cohesion was due to inspiration (Abbate), leadership (Garcia), firepower (Beardsley), aggressiveness (McCulloch), steadiness (Esquibel), and raw spirit (Myers)." Where these individual Marines are identified it is a credit to the unit as a whole that they were all imbued with these warrior traits.

At the close of the book Mr. West takes a critical look at the National policy that put our young Marines in such a hell hole. He compares and contrasts policy between Viet Nam and Afghanistan making the reader really question whether we learn anything from our past decisions and resulting consequences. Most of all I urge future Administrations to read this book and stop using our military in the role of nation builders. The job on nation building belongs to the State Dept and such organizations as the Peace Corps, not the United States Marine Corps who is neither trained nor equipped for such a mission.
