

Ethics, Integrity, and the Toll of Modern Irregular Warfare: A Conversation with Pulitzer Prize-Winning Journalist Dave Philipps

Description

Editor's note: This article is part of Project Maritime, which explores modern challenges and opportunities in the maritime dimension at the intersection of irregular warfare and strategic competition. We warmly invite your participation and engagement as we embark on this project. Please [send submissions](#) with the subject line "Project Maritime Submission" and follow us on X (formerly Twitter) [@proj_maritime](#).

Project Maritime had the pleasure of interviewing New York Times military reporter, and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, [Dave Philipps](#). Philipps' writing has special resonance to those focused on irregular warfare in the littorals and those soldiers, sailors, marines, and operators, who have been serving in expeditionary operations in a variety of conflict zones.

Mr. Philipps may be best known for his searing and gripping book, ["Alpha: Eddie Gallagher and the War for the Soul of the Navy SEALs"](#). Philipps has focused his writing on small units, and the soldiers, marines, and special operators who have fought the Global War on Terror.

Additionally, he has had a series of pieces over the past year focusing on the brain damage apparently caused by cumulative shock-waves to troops exposed to repeated [blasts](#) from weapons in combat or high intensity training. He has [exposed](#) injury clusters around Army and Marine artillerymen who fired up to 10,000 rounds in just several months in small units [deployed](#) against the Islamic State in Mosul. He has documented similar problems with [mortars](#), [M1 tanks](#), [Carl Gustaf recoilless rifle](#), and most recently brain trauma among elite [Navy Special Boat teams](#) made up of U.S. Navy Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewmen who deliver SEALs to the fight in high-powered craft that may expose their crews to 64Gs (64 times the force of gravity).

We hope that his unique perspective furthers the discussion among those interested in maritime irregular warfare.

Q: Your book ["Alpha: Eddie Gallagher and the War for the Soul the Navy SEALs"](#) chronicles an apparent war crime – if not multiple crimes – in urban fighting against ISIS and Mosul; a cover up; failures in the NCIS investigation and prosecution; as well as the firing

of the Navy Secretary. In many cases, the whistleblowers who tried to do the right thing appear to have been shunned or suffered more than the alleged war criminal. What would you tell someone who has not read the book about why they should read it?

I think this is a really old story in in more modern clothing; the story of the experienced enlisted ground-pounder who thinks he knows better â?? not only better than the young officer whoâ??s in charge â?? but also the folks back home who make the rules. It is a story that has happened for generations, and in fact, what happened with this Navy SEAL platoon basically played out 20 years before in the movie [Platoon](#). It is so similar to the movie that one of the SEALs told me that he started watching *Platoon* on that deployment and had to turn it off because it was so disturbing.

And one of the things that I found fascinating about Eddie Gallagher (the chief who was accused of these crimes), was that he had really grown up in the Global War on Terror; very much surrounded by guys whose whole adult lives had been dedicated to that effort. Going after ISIS and to going after the Taliban; and none of the strategic goals had really been met. And so, these guys had created their own culture where wars are not going to be won and lost. Youâ??re never going to get a ticker tape parade. And they built sort of a warrior culture based on, like, â??How many people did you kill, and how did you kill them?â?• â??Did you kill them in a pure warrior way or not?â?• I think thatâ??s what was driving Edward Gallagher when he took his platoon to Mosul. What he was trying to achieve was not something strategic. He wanted to â?? what the SEALs would say â?? is that he â??Wanted to get after it and drop bodies.â?• To him and to a lot of people around him, his superiors and his peers, that had value in itself; which is pretty warped, but he had lived in a pretty warped situation of constant deployments since he was a teen.

The story is sort of a microcosm of the unintended problem that having these long, amorphous wars can cause when you have this type of professional war fighter who, for them, essentially, the war is never over.

Q: Since writing the book, what kind of feedback have you gotten from SEALs, and others in the Special Operations community- who are currently serving, or veterans?

Itâ??s really mixed, because veterans are a diverse group of people. Eddie Gallagher wasnâ??t very happy about it. He tried to sue me and gave up. There are people that are good friends of his or who embrace the same ethos that he did, and probably think that Iâ??m naive and Iâ??m telling a story thatâ??s pointless.

There are other people in the SEALs that really saw this as someone finally turning on the light and sending some of the cockroaches scurrying, because there are some dark parts of their subculture that

are vying for more influence. I get a lot of young SEALs and other young officers who pick up this book and it's very helpful to them. I think that there are a lot of older SEALs who are now out, and who read this book and said, "Thank God there's finally a book about the SEALs that isn't some sort of *American Sniper* glorification."

Q: In the book, you define this preexisting pirate culture that was in conflict with the rules-based culture. Do you have an opinion as to what is more ascendant, or is it just kind of cyclical?

Naval Special Warfare does not let me walk around its bases and talk to its operators. So the best I can do is sort of echolocation. You know, I can't actually even see it. It's like water behind a dam, you know, the potential to get frustrated with the realities of warfare and overstep the rules of engagement will always be there and will always be pressing against regulations. If it is held back, it has to be through constant education and discussion about morals and ethics.

Q: One of the themes that struck us in your book was the small unit leadership and its absence. Was that a major theme of the story for you? How did you see the leadership or lack of playing out?

One real frustration for me is I did not get to talk to the officer in charge of that platoon. He never said anything to NCIS. He never said anything to me. The Navy SEALs that I talked to, who served in the unit with him just sort of shook their heads and said, "You know he was a good guy. We liked him." But I think he didn't understand that someone like Eddie Gallagher could exist and could be misleading him or leading him down a bad road, and he wasn't prepared to resist it. And the other thing is we don't know how much he did resist it. How much was he talking to the officers above him, saying, "Hey, I got a problem with my chief," and how much was the organization saying, "Don't worry about it?"

It would have been a short and totally different story if the leadership had worked out as it was supposed to on paper. Essentially, what would have happened is Eddie Gallagher would have been relieved pretty early on in the middle of his deployment; someone else would have come in. He probably would have been put at a desk in Coronado, California until he retired. No one would have ever heard about this whole incident. The dead body that they'd taken pictures with would have never become the center of a court martial; and I think it would have worked. And I also think that the guys in the platoon would have been okay with dealing with it quietly within the family, so "We can actually do our job." And it was only after repeatedly trying to get the system to work, that they kind of broke the glass and pulled the emergency handle by going outside of the SEAL family to NCIS, that things got really out of control, and I think that they tried, probably at three or four different levels of the

organization to not have that happen and to deal with things quietly within the organization.

So it's both understandable but also problematic, because how many other Eddie Gallaghers were there where the system was smart enough and responsive enough to, deal with it quietly? I have a feeling there were quite a few, although we'll never know.

Q: Are there other books or stories that helped you tell this one?

When I was writing this, I really wanted to write like almost a mystery drama, because all the pieces were there. And one of the things that you learn as a newspaper writer is the easiest thing for a reader to do with your writing is stop reading. If you're going to make a larger point about ethics within the military, or concerns about elite troops, you better get people to turn the page, or you're not going to be able to do it.

What's funny is, when I finished writing the book, I realized what I'd actually written was a noir story. In the classic formula of the noir there's going to be a crime at the beginning, and the detective is going to try and solve it, and maybe it's going to get solved, and maybe it isn't, but it doesn't matter, because the crux of the noir is that in trying to solve that crime, the detective will reveal an even bigger and more disturbing crime that cannot be solved.

And that's kind of what happened with the Gallagher story. There was a body. It was probably killed by Eddie Gallagher. People stood around it and took pictures. But then the larger crime is sort of Mosul itself - why had we sent these guys in to Mosul to try and take pot shots at ISIS, while at the same time, that city was leveled by a coalition effort - leveled thousands of buildings and thousands of civilians were killed? And then we had a trial over the case of one combatant who was killed by a chief, but we never discussed the larger thing that was happening. So, I realized I told a detailed story about this one small part of Mosul, but I don't know if it really settles anything.

Q: You've written some powerful stories about soldiers, Marines and SEALs who have committed suicide or have had their physical and mental health damaged by blast waves. In particular, there were some artillery gun crews who fired more than 10,000 rounds in a few months in the fight against ISIS, and many of those soldiers were demonstrating symptoms consistent with concussion at the time. Some came home basically incapable of functioning with an inability to read, follow instructions, exhibiting mood swings, etc. If you were the Secretary of Defense for one day, what are the changes you would seek to implement on this issue?

I actually think that this is not a different subject [from my writing about Eddie Gallagher], and I didn't realize this until I started doing this reporting. I think that there are a lot of people in the Navy SEALs, especially if they stay in for many years, like Eddie Gallagher (who joined when he was at 17), who are walking around with brain injuries that make it hard to function; that can make them emotional, uninhibited, and make their judgment seriously suspect. Those injuries result from repeated exposure in training to routine and proper operation of weapons, and it gets worse over time.

You have people that as they progress in their career and rise in rank and are given more responsibility are at the same time potentially having compromised brain function. And if you take that dynamic and you expand it to Naval Special Warfare, the young SEALs dealing with Eddie Gallagher are saying, "What the hell is going on?" They are trying to report it to older SEALs who say, "Don't worry about it." It's impossible for us to understand how much brain injury is mixed in there, but it is quite possible that brain injury is a significant factor in some of the dysfunction in that organization.

As I started to learn how pervasive these injuries are and how debilitating they can be (and also how hidden they are within the senior ranks, especially senior enlisted), it really has started to make me look at all of these things in a totally different light. I think in that context, Eddie Gallagher looks much more like a victim than he does like a perpetrator, right?

Let me answer the question about what we should do about this. I'm a novice and not qualified to do that, but I can tell you that the Department of Defense has been sort of spinning its wheels on this for more than 10 years because it tries to hold two truths in hand at once: One, we don't know if this is harmful or not. Two, since we have no evidence that this is harmful, there's no reason for us to study it.

It's like putting the tobacco companies in charge of whether cigarettes are bad for you. This is so central to operations that looking at it would be severely disruptive, and so nobody wants to do it. Washington needs to mandate real research, so that we can understand what's harmful and what's not. We all want an effective military, and these folks to be taken care of, and we certainly don't want people who are rising up in the enlisted ranks who can't make good decisions. That's really bad and dangerous.

It's got to start there, and then basic tracking should start immediately. We need to do this so that if we do learn five years down the road, that have been exposed to something potentially harmful, folks can get help. Right now the dynamic is, you go to the VA and say, "I've got all these symptoms of brain injury," and they look back at your record and say, "But there was no event that ever caused it. How can you have a brain injury when all you ever did is routinely and safely fire your

weapon?â?• Right now I think the best-informed people donâ??t know what to do.

Q: It seems like there is a basket of injuries, whether physical, moral or emotional, from Global War on Terror. Has your reporting led you to anything else that would fit into that basket?

When I started my journalism career and was writing about Iraq and Afghanistan wars pretty early on, it was new and kind of mysterious to write about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This was really the first conflict where we were standing up an infrastructure to detect and treat that stuff within the active-duty military. It didnâ??t always work perfectly, but they were trying to take care of folks. What Iâ??ve realized within the last 12 months is that theyâ??ve missed the boat or repeated the exact same mistake that happened in Vietnam, in World War II, and in World War I, of missing what this injury is. I kept running into people who had been diagnosed with PTSD, and it didnâ??t make sense. They werenâ??t particularly traumatized by the things they had experienced in war, and yet they had all this list of symptoms that made them qualify as suffering from PTSD, and they were being treated for it, but the treatment was not working.

And many of these people, a huge percentage of combat veterans who come back and get the standard treatments for PTSD wash out of it. First, I thought we needed better treatment. But now Iâ??m now convinced that, more than anything, the anxiety, the sleeplessness, and all that stuff is caused by repetitive blast injury. And when you have a repetitive blast injury, and it creates an anxiety disorder in your in your brain that can lead to very real things like what we call PTSD, anxiety, and rumination on past traumatic events. Iâ??m not saying that PTSD isnâ??t real. I think it is, and I think it can be really serious, but I think too often things are labeled as PTSD, when they are much, much more complex.

Iâ??ve now talked to a lot of people who were never deployed, but worked around heavy weapons for years, and their symptoms are the exact same as the guys who went to war. It makes me wonder, what is driving it? How much of it is the way weâ??ve designed weapons? Maybe it has very little to do with combat.

Q: The [Lewiston shooter](#), right? The Army has [denied](#) that his years on the grenade range had anything to do with his brain injury, which is counter indicated by what the brain researchers, whoâ??ve actually seen the brain have said. The Army said his brain injury came from falling off a roof.

It makes me think of the NFL. Because what weâ??re looking at is so central to their operations, whether youâ??re talking about the army or the NFL. And so, they cannot talk about it. The NFL does something that the Army is on its way to doing. It says, â??We know this is serious. Weâ??re going to

have a new concussion protocol, because we take concussions very seriously.â•

The research says concussion is independent of this problem. You can have all of these small, non-concussive hits that lead to these really debilitating CTE injuries. The NFL is like, â•Weâ•re on it, weâ•re taking care of it,â• but at the same time, they canâ•t really take care of it, or there wouldnâ•t be an NFL. I actually think that the military isnâ•t in quite such a pickle. I think that probably there are ways to do this safely and spread-out risk. Whether weâ•re designing different weapons, or limiting a lot of the unneeded training thatâ•s going on.

Let me give you an example. We have heavy artillery that in 2024 we fire by pulling a six-foot string. There is no reason for eight guys to stand around a giant cannon thatâ•s going to go off. We can do it off somebodyâ•s phone. Obviously, in a combat environment, you need that to be much more secure. But again, we donâ•t need to do it like we did in the 1890s. In the 1600s did holding up a blunderbuss full of black powder to shoot it make sense? Yeah, it probably did. But in 2024 does holding a Carl Gustaf rocket launcher right next to your head so you can aim and fire? Probably not, and not only from the point of view of the safety of the operatorâ•s brain, but from the situational awareness and effectiveness of that small unit thatâ•s using that rocket launcher, because that guy, now heâ•s probably not thinking clearly for the next 20-30, minutes.

Q: Thinking of your [story](#) of the guys that were firing the 10,000 rounds in a few months at all coming back injured (*From 2016-2017 the Pentagon deployed a small number of artillerymen to pound the Islamic State around Mosul â• the medical records of one Marine artillery battery demonstrated that fifty-percent were diagnosed with brain injuries*). Of course there is the issue between causation and correlation, but itâ•s hard to say that you have a small unit that fires a high volume of artillery in a short period of time, and they all are exhibiting pretty severe symptoms of something when they come home. So, what was going on?

The problem is that everybody in the military is just doing their job. Itâ•s not the job of the captain in charge of that unit to really understand that stuff. Heâ•s never been briefed on it. He doesnâ•t know that maybe repeated safe operation of the weapon system could cause psychosis.

Many of these people canâ•t sleep. So, they go to the sleep doctor. Theyâ•re going to give you all these ideas about how to sleep, but theyâ•re not going to look at you for brain damage. Say youâ•re depressed. You go to the psychologist and theyâ•re not seeing it as a brain injury either. And so there were a couple people within Naval medicine who said, â•We think this is a bigger deal.â• They wrote about it, but it sort of disappeared into the ether. There was nobody within the organization to telegraph it back down to the units. And so today, I donâ•t think many of these units are doing things any differently.

The views expressed in this interview do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

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