

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Young Men in War

Malou Innocent

April 2, 2012

Since 2006, journalist [Neil Shea](#) has embedded with U.S. military units in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many soldiers [serve valiantly](#), and most never commit atrocities; however, Shea [argues](#) in the latest issue of *The American Scholar* that we tend to overlook the daily activities that erode efforts to win hearts and minds.

In Afghanistan, Shea recalls the bluster of young men with guns who shot as many animals as they could in an attempt to deny the Taliban resources. After all, a sheep could be Taliban food, or a camel could be Taliban transportation. The result was an appalling disregard for Afghan property that angered average Afghans. He writes:

Many times I have watched soldiers or Marines, driven by boredom or fear, behave selfishly and meanly, even illegally, in minor ways. In a few searing moments I have wondered what would come next, what the men would do to prisoners or civilians or suspected insurgents. And I have wondered how to describe these moments without reporting melodramatic minutiae or betraying the men who allowed me in.

He recounts night raids in which men blew open doors with more explosives than necessary because it was “fun.” They broke furniture, smashed dishes, kicked over grain baskets to search for weapons and contraband, and forced

people down on their knees. Unsurprisingly, such actions drove many hapless locals into the arms of the Taliban. As one soldier told Shea:

“Yeah, we definitely made some Taliban out here. It was like a week-long Taliban recruiting drive. And we had fun doing it. I love recruiting for the Taliban. It’s called job security.” [Emphasis added.]

Shea’s [article](#), and his [personal reflection](#) of the conflict with American Public Media’s Dick Gordon, offer a candid perspective of life on the battlefield that ordinary Americans rarely hear about. That we ask our men and women in uniform to have a “light-switch control over their aggression” offers some insight into the senseless slaughter of Afghan civilians by Staff Sgt. Robert Bales. Shea writes despondently:

[W]e have no good method for dealing with men who grow too dangerous. We vaguely hope their anger does not spill over, or come home. It is not simple. My own reaction to the men of Destroyer is difficult. I liked them. I still want to believe they were merely full of bravado.