

Author Sean Naylor Discusses U.S.-Led Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq

(Interview. Rick Warner is an editor for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By Rick Warner

March 23 (Bloomberg) -- Deluged by daily reports about U.S. casualties in Iraq, it's easy for Americans to forget about Afghanistan and the hunt for Osama bin Laden.

Sean Naylor provides a timely reminder in his new book, ``Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda'' (Berkley, 425 pages, \$25.95). The book tells the story of a crucial battle during the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, which was launched a month after the Sept. 11 attacks when the Taliban refused to hand over bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders to U.S. authorities.

Bin Laden, of course, was never found and most al-Qaeda leaders escaped from the mountains of eastern Afghanistan during Operation Anaconda. The main reason, according to Naylor, was poor planning by U.S. military officials who underestimated the enemy's will to fight and waged the battle with a hodgepodge of units thrown together at the last minute.

Naylor, a 38-year-old writer for Army Times who grew up in England, has covered U.S. military operations in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan. He recently spoke with Rick Warner at Bloomberg's New York headquarters about Afghanistan and Iraq.

Warner: Before we get to Afghanistan, let's talk a little about Iraq. Are you hopeful about the situation there, or do you think we're getting bogged down in a Vietnam-like quagmire?

Naylor: I don't know about a Vietnam-like quagmire, but we're still there almost two years since we invaded. ``Bogged down'' is kind of a subjective phrase, but there doesn't appear to be any departure on the horizon.

Finding Bin Laden

Warner: Some of Bush's critics say the war in Iraq has diverted attention from the hunt for bin Laden, which should be our top priority. Do you agree?

Naylor: From the moment the Pentagon began planning war in Iraq, it diverted resources from the war in Afghanistan -- and specifically the hunt for al-Qaeda. There are limited numbers of troops trained to do that sort of thing, and you can either use them in one place or you use them in another. They can't be two places at the same time.

Warner: According to your book, the U.S. war effort in

Afghanistan was plagued by massive confusion and disorganization. Why couldn't these problems be anticipated or avoided?

Naylor: They could have been avoided, but that would have required the Pentagon and U.S. Central Command to deploy a more logical force to fight the war in Afghanistan. By not deploying a cohesive, coherent, pre-existing organization, they had to put one together from scratch to fight Operation Anaconda. And that sort of situation is almost inevitably going to result in confusion, mixed messages, things slipping between the cracks.

Praise From Soldiers

Warner: In many cases, soldiers were taking directions from command posts that were hundreds or thousands of miles away, instead of from officers in the field. Doesn't that defy common sense?

Naylor: Most of the people I interviewed said it did indeed defy common sense.

Warner: You're very critical of some decisions made by military higher-ups. What kind of feedback have you gotten from the military brass?

Naylor: Frankly, all the feedback I've had so far has been positive. General Hagenbeck, who was in charge of the operation, told me that he thought he was portrayed fairly and accurately, and one or two other senior officers have given me a lot of credit.

Missed Opportunity

Warner: How about the rank and file?

Naylor: I get e-mails every day from them saying, ``Hey, I just got your book, I read it in one night and I want to tell you I think you did a great job.''

Warner: Your book is subtitled, ``The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda.''

What was Anaconda and why was it so important to tell this particular story?

Naylor: Anaconda was the largest set-piece battle fought by U.S. troops since Operation Desert Storm, and it was the last opportunity to kill or capture a large number of al-Qaeda fighters and senior leaders in one place. And that opportunity was largely missed.

Warner: Seven U.S. soldiers were killed during the operation and many others wounded. Was the mission accomplished?

Naylor: The mission was partially accomplished. The object of Operation Anaconda was to kill or capture the al-Qaeda force that was in the Shahikot Valley. I estimate in the low hundreds

of al-Qaeda fighters were killed, but at least as many, if not more, got away. So I don't think you can call it an overwhelming success.

Machine-Gun Fire

Warner: Did you have any close calls when you were in the field?

Naylor: Well, I spent the better part of a day in a wadi, which is sort of a washed-out, dried-up riverbed, with a small company of infantry being mortared and machine-gunned. I wouldn't say that was a particularly close call, but I could hear the machine-gun bullets zipping over my head. I'm not sure that I want to get much closer than that.

Warner: All the elaborate planning for Operation Anaconda seemed to go out the window the minute the battle began. Is that typical in a war?

Naylor: It's quite typical. You like to think if you're in the military that you can stick somewhat to the plan. But there's a cliché in the military, which is that the plan will last only until the first round is fired. And, in fact, it didn't even last that long in Operation Anaconda.

Warner: Your book is called ``Not a Good Day to Die.'' Where did that title come from?

Naylor: It came from one of the sergeants in the 101st Airborne Division who was describing a particularly stressful part of the fight. I said, ``What was going through your mind at the time?'' And he said, ``I was thinking, I don't want my boys to die today. It's not a good day to die.'' That just leapt out at me.

--Editors: Schatz, Todd.

Story Illustration: For more cultural news from Bloomberg, go to {MUSE <GO>}. For more information on the book, go to <http://us.penguin.com/>

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