



The Strong Gray Line: War-Time Experiences from the West Point Class of 2004

Edited by Cory Wallace

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Most books are crafted with the goal of achieving an objective or multiple objectives. Some seek to entertain their readers while others may be written to educate readers or add to their body of knowledge. Still others seek to pay tribute to an event, an individual, or a group. Of course, seeking an objective and accomplishing an objective are clearly two different things. One recent volume which unquestionably achieves multiple objectives is *The Strong Gray Line*. It is a book which educates, ensures the service of our Soldiers and the sacrifices of the family are remembered, and pays tribute to the Soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice.

The focus of *The Strong Gray Line* is the West Point Class of 2004 — more specifically, the roles and experiences of the class during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To address these roles and experiences, readers will find a book unique in organization, content, and its contributors. These factors combine to make this a volume which will have a dramatic impact on all who read it.

As highlighted earlier, this is a book which superbly honors Soldiers who died in service of their country. During the period of 2005-2012, 14 members of the class of 2004 were killed. Thirteen of these Soldiers died in combat and one in a training accident. To honor their memory, the first section of the book, entitled “The Fallen,” contains an essay written on each Soldier. Fittingly, each essay is crafted by a fellow member of the class. Some of the essays are written in a solemn tone while others are a bit more subdued. They are fitting tributes to the Soldiers and undoubtedly humanize them to the public.

The majority of the remainder of the book keys on the service of these Soldiers during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It additionally highlights the significance of the family members left behind. In addressing this, the book utilizes 13 personal essays written again by members of the class of 2004 in a section entitled, “The War.” These chapters truly touch on the myriad of emotions that are a part of war. In combination, they highlight the human dimension of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as any book I’ve read.

In between these two major portions of the book, there are two small sections which fit perfectly in the scope of the volume. The first is placed between the two chief sections and is appropriately called “Interlude.” In developing this section, the editor wanted to provide readers with a bridge between the essays in tribute of the fallen Soldiers and class members discussing their Iraq and Afghanistan experiences. To achieve this, he placed two pieces (one a small story and the other a poem) which I believe clearly make this an effective transition for the reader.

The concluding chapter utilizes the reflections of a recent West Point graduate taken from his senior year. In it, he highlights the bond he passionately feels he shares with past graduates of the U.S. Military Academy. It is a chapter which not only interconnects the past and present as it pertains to West Point graduates but makes the connection between all who have served. It is a powerful conclusion.

After reading this review, you may conclude that *The Strong Gray Line* will only appeal or benefit those with a West Point connection. That could not be farther from the truth. It is a book which pays tribute to all who have served or currently serve their country. It provides the public perspectives and shares emotions that seem to be a bit more infrequent today in society.

In the book's introduction, a passage will surely stand out for readers. It states, "While many of us have left active duty for other pursuits, others continue to wear a uniform. We all carry a burden of living a life worthy of the sacrifices of our classmates and so many others. To those who bore the ultimate cost and who now grip our hands from the shadows, we dedicate this book." *The Strong Gray Line* unquestionably provides a dedication worthy of all who bore the ultimate cost.