



The Afghan Campaign: A Novel

By Steven Pressfield



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The Afghan Campaign: A Novel By Steven Pressfield Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #358985 in Books
- Brand: Pressfield, Steven
- Published on: 2007-06-05
- Released on: 2007-06-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.98" h x .76" w x 5.21" l, .58 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 368 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

“Pressfield has done it again. *The Afghan Campaign* is yet another gripping historical novel . . . Although set in ancient times, Pressfield’s narration of the Macedonians’ efforts reveals remarkable parallels to later efforts by the Romans, British, Soviets, and Americans . . . an intense, fun, and thought-provoking read. It belongs on your shelf.”

—T. X. Hammes, *Marine Corps Gazette*

“Pressfield’s scholarly skills are part and parcel of his impressive talent for re-creating the visceral, scalp-carving, lance-in-back horror of ancient battle.”

—*USA Today*

“Fasinating . . . As Patrick O’Brien’s prose seemed to encapsulate the feel of the Napoleonic-era warship, Pressfield’s crisp and eloquent style reconstitutes the ancient battlefield.”

About the Author

Steven Pressfield is the author of the historical novels *Gates of Fire*, *The Virtues of War*, *Tides of War*, and *Last of the Amazons*. He lives in Los Angeles.

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1.

I am the third and last son of my family to come out to Afghanistan. My older brothers went out as cavalrymen. I signed with the infantry.

The distinction between horse and foot is not so great in Afghanistan as it was in Alexander’s earlier campaigns in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and Persia. Out east, an infantryman is expected to leap onto the back of any creature that will bear his weight—horse, mule, ass, or *yaboo* (the Afghan pony)—and ride to the site of action, there to dismount and fight, or even fight from the beast’s back if necessary. Likewise horse troopers, even the King’s Companions, think nothing of hitting the ground and slugging it out on foot alongside the dirt-eaters.

My father was killed in Afghanistan, or more precisely he expired of sepsis in a military hospital in Susia, in the province of Areia, which lies on the western border of the country. My father was not a mounted warrior or a foot soldier but a combat engineer of the siege train—what the troops call a “bucket man” because miners and sappers dig their trenches and raise their earthworks with wicker baskets. His name was the same as mine, Matthias.

My father fought at the Granicus River, at Tyre, Gaza, and at Issus. He was an authentic hero. My brothers are too. Once, when I was sixteen, my father sent home an army warrant worth a quarter talent of gold. We bought a second farm with it, with two barns and a year-round creek, and had enough left over to fence the place in stone.

It was my father's keenest wish that I, the youngest brother, not come out to war. My mother, further, was violently opposed to any step that would take me away from the land. "You may call it your misfortune, Matthias," she declared, "to have been whelped last of the litter. But, like it or not, you are my bulwark and the bulwark of this farm. Your father is gone. We shall never see your brothers again. Lust for glory will be their finish; they will leave great names and nothing more."

My mother feared that I, gone overseas, would tread into the snare of some foreign wench and, taking her to wife, never return to Macedon.

I was eighteen, however, and as mad for glory as every other overheated young blood in a kingdom whose twenty-five-year-old sovereign, Alexander son of Philip, had in only four years sacked earth's mightiest empire and turned our homeland delirious with conquest, fame, and treasure.

In the Macedonian army, enlistments are measured not by years but by cycles, or "bumps." A bump is eighteen months. Minimum enlistment is two bumps, one to be trained and one to serve, but a man must commit for a third cycle, a total of four and a half years, if and when he is called overseas. It worked this way: A recruit entered service with a regiment of the Occupation Army. This was the force left behind by Alexander to hold down Greece and the tribal north. All these contingents were territorial; you had to come from the district or you couldn't get in. As Alexander's needs in Asia necessitated, he sent home for replacements. Sometimes entire regiments were called up; other times individuals, either those in specific military specialties such as intelligence or siege engineering, or simply infantrymen with seniority whose lucky number came up.

All this was moot for a youth of my district, Apollonia. Apollonia has no infantry regiment. The region is cavalry country. The most famous squadron of Alexander's Companions, the ile of Socrates Sathon, comes from Apollonia. This squadron, in which both my brothers served, led the charge at the battle of the Granicus River; it fought at Alexander's right hand in the great victories of Issus and Gaugamela. It has more hero statues at Dium than any other squadron, including the Royal. My best friend Lucas and I, and every other war-crazed youth in the territory, had trained year-round since before we could walk, on fire for the day we would enter the trials and with heaven's aid become, like Apollonia's heroes before us, King's Companions.

We were too late, Lucas and I. By the time our hour came, Alexander's army had pushed so deep into Asia and had assimilated troops from so many vanquished nations that our king no longer sent home for Companion cavalry, except to replace men killed, wounded, or retired. The horse troops he employed now were all hired squadrons--Persians mostly, with Syrians, Lydians, Cappadocians, and riders of other kingdoms of the conquered East. No Mack could join these, even if he could get overseas, which he couldn't, or could speak the barbarian tongue, which he wouldn't.

There was only one way for Lucas and me to get out to Asia. As hired infantry. As mercenaries.

At that time, scores of private contractors--called pilophoroi for the felt caps they wore--traveled the cities of Greece and Asia Minor, signing up troops. It was a business. Candidates paid a fee, called a "pony" because it was so steep a man could buy a fine colt with it. The felt-caps got them in.

Turning eighteen, Lucas and I trekked three days to the port of Methone, the hiring depot for mercenary infantry. The taverns were crawling with grizzled professionals--Arcadians and Syracusans, Cretans and Rhodians, even officers of the Achaeans and Spartans. They all knew each other from prior hitches; they had mates and commanders who could get them aboard. Lucas and I were the youngest by years. We knew nobody. No pilophoros would touch us, no matter how convincingly we lied about our age or our service

histories (of which we had none).

We stayed ten days, with our payoff cash dwindling rapidly, trying to talk or buy our way in anywhere. At the last hour we went seeking the recruiting general himself. Of course we couldn't get near him. A Line Sergeant from Pella kicked us out. "Wait a minute," he said, hearing our accents. "Are you boys from Apollonia?"

He wanted to know if we could ride.

We were centaurs!

The sergeant drew up our papers on the spot and wouldn't take any money either. He put us down as Mounted Infantry. That was what Alexander needed most. Lucas and I could not believe our luck. We asked what outfit we'd be with and when we'd get our horses.

"No outfits," the sergeant said. "And no horses neither." He had put us on the rolls because we were Macedonians, amid all these foreigners. "No overseas captain ever turned down a lad from home."

We thanked him with all our hearts. He brushed it off. "Don't worry about what outfit you ship out with, or if you never see an hour of drill. Out east," he said, "the king'll draft you wherever he needs you."

2.

Our force of replacements landed at Tripolis in Syria on the sixteenth of Daesius, early summer, in the sixth year of Alexander's reign, the fourth since the expeditionary force had crossed out of Europe into Asia. The king and his army were then a thousand miles east, on their way from Persepolis, Persia's capital, to Ecbatana in Media, the summer palace of her kings. The Persian Empire had fallen; Alexander now pursued its fugitive king. Our lord's pack train, reports said, was seven thousand camels and ten thousand pairs of asses, all laden with gold.

Our detachment of replacements was sixty-one hundred in forty-seven ships. The harbor at Tripolis couldn't hold that many, and, as the vessels had neither berths nor provisions to lie-to overnight in the roads, a conference was held of the captains, who were just merchant skippers hired for pay, at which it was decided that our ferry (which is what it was) and about ten others would be rowed to shallow water, where we scuffs were told to grab our kit, hop over the side, and swim for it. Which we did. It was a grand lark, except that I ruined a fine pair of boots in the saltwater, growing too weary to hold them over my head. This is how I landed in Asia, soaked as a drowned cat, and barefoot.

Replacements are not an army. Our mob had been formed not into regiments but into "S.C.'s," shipboard contingents, and did not, when we landed, even have our arms. The cavalry didn't have its horses. The animals were following in other transports. There was a tent city waiting, and an escort of six hundred Syrian mercenaries, and fourteen hundred hired infantry of Lycia, with Macedonian officers, who were to take us up to Marathus and from there by way of Larissa to Thapsacus, where we would cross the Euphrates into Mesopotamian Syria and Kurdistan. The march to catch up with Alexander would take between three and four months.

As always in a new camp, the troops plunged at once into their favored pastimes--touring the site looking up

friends, and poaching every item of kit they could lay hands on. You couldn't set down a heel of bread without somebody snatching it, and a decent hat or a pair of road-slappers were sure goners. A man hung his purse next to his testicles and, after shaking hands with a stranger, checked to make sure both sacks were still where he had left them.

In Alexander's fighting army, every trooper knew the mark he was to stand on. But here, a thousand miles to the rear, the show was all orphan stew. You ate when the cooks opened the tents and bunked where you could find a patch of dirt wide enough to hold your bones. You kept with your mates to keep the scroungers from picking you blind. My bunch was Lucas; Terres, called "Rags" for his dandy's love of clothes; and Peithon, undersized, called "Flea." We were all from Apollonia, all eighteen, and had known each other all our lives.

Lucas was our leader. He was a born operator and set out to keep our heads above the general ruck. We were supposed to get paid on landing at Tripolis (it'd been a month, marshaling and crossing), but if there was any shine with this mob, I never saw it. In fact we had to pay, ourselves. The slugs at the cook-tent wanted cash to get in. You had to pay to take a crap.

"We've got to find ourselves a bull," pronounced Lucas. Meaning someone with rank to attach ourselves to.

We found him in a Color Sergeant named Tolmides. Tollo for short. He was a stubby fellow with great mustaches and a boar's-tusk cap, a mate of Lucas's father, and in charge here of a company of Lycian infantry. Lucas spotted him in the latrine line. "Hey, Tollo! Where's a scuff take a free shit around here?"

Tollo came over, laughing. "By Hades' balls, you little off-scourings got all growed up, did you?" His rank was no joke though. He was a big onion. He got us out of camp. We chowed down with his Lycians out on the plain.

What, we asked, were the chances of getting paid?

About the same as crapping ivory.

When do we get assigned to regiments?

When you pay off the officers escorting you.

What about kit?

We would not be issued arms till Thapsacus or later, Tollo told us, and when we did we'd have to cough up for those too. "Don't worry, the quartermaster'll put it against your roll." Meaning our pay records. We'd tick it down out of time served.

Lucas looked glum. "They didn't tell us this back home."

"If they did, you wouldn't have come out," said Tollo. And he laughed.

We glued ourselves to him. He and his Mack comrades had served as scouts in Forward Operations, running reconnaissance for Alexander in Areia and Afghanistan. They had been sent back to train us replacements on the march. They got double pay for this, and double that for escort duty.

"Don't take to gloom, little brothers." Tollo pointed east, into the Asiatic night. "Men drop like flies out there, from heat, sickness, or they just run queer." And he tapped his skull. "You'll make grade fast if you show strong stuff. Keep your sheet clean and do what you're told. You'll work fine."

There were six other Macks in Tollo's cadre, including Stephanos of Aegae, the celebrated war poet. He was a decorated hero and a genuine celebrity. Stephanos was thirty-five; he should have been a captain or at least a full lieutenant, but he stayed a Line Sergeant. He liked it that way. Here is one of the poems that had made him famous back home and a favorite, even, of the women.

A SOLDIER'S PACK

*Experience has taught the soldier how to
pack his pannier, with the stuff he needs most
near the top, where he can get at it. In the outer pockets
he stows his onions and garlic, sealed tight so they don't
stink up the weather kit and half-fleece on the other side.
At the bottom, deep inside, he stashes those items that must
at all costs be protected, against dust, against being
dropped, against the elements. There, in the doeskin
you gave me, I keep your letters, my darling wife.*

The youngest of these Mack cadre was past thirty; several were fifty and more. They were the roughest planks we had ever seen. We were scared to death of them. Any one, by himself, could have manhandled the pack of us. We found ourselves running errands for them and shouldering their kit, without anyone ordering us, just so they wouldn't bite our heads off. Lucas and I were slouching back into camp with firewood one night when we were called over by one of them, a Flag Sergeant whose real name no one dared ask and whom the troopers called simply "Flag," the customary title of address for one of his rank.

"You two, learn something."

We dropped our brush and scurried to him like schoolboys. Flag summoned one of his Lycians and had the fellow face about. He thrust the shaft of his half-pike (the shorter version of the sarissa used then in Asia) into my fist.

"Kill him," he commanded.

I turned bright plum. Could he be serious?

"How do you finish a man who's running from you?"

I didn't know.

Flag tugged the Lycian around. "What if he turns about and faces you?"

I didn't know.

"Take his place."

"What?"

Suddenly I found myself in the Lycian's spot. "Run," Flag commanded. Before I could take one step, I found myself facedown in the dirt with the wind hammered out of me. I didn't even know where Flag had hit me. I felt the butt of his half-pike upend me in one instant, then smash my skull in the next. I couldn't move or breathe; I was helpless.

From the Hardcover edition.

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