

Alpha: Eddie Gallagher and the War for the Soul of the Navy SEALs

By David Philipps

Crown, 2021

399 pp. \$24.49

ISBN: 9780593238387

Reviewed by Paula G. Thornhill

A *Alpha* is a fast-paced, brilliantly written, and ultimately disturbing book about the health of the Navy SEAL community. Using the infamous Eddie Gallagher case for its core narrative, *Alpha* weaves together Gallagher's actions and the larger developments in Naval Special Warfare during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The SEALs emerge from this era as a troubled organization, full of first-rate special operators willing to take on the toughest direct-action missions but largely devoid of a higher moral code to guide their actions and dismissive of any oversight beyond that of the insular world of special operations.

David Philipps approaches his topic with a keen reporter's eye. A Pulitzer Prize winner and *New York Times* correspondent, he meticulously pieces together the Gallagher story, starting with

how Gallagher overcame “bad karma” to build an aggressive, seemingly cohesive unit prior to deploying to Iraq. Once in theater, however, Gallagher malevolently used the unit to launch senseless attacks and kill innocent civilians. This steroid-dependent chief petty officer also rides roughshod over his platoon commander and assistant platoon commander throughout the deployment, denying the unit of any officer leadership and further undermining unit morale.

Once back from Iraq, some of the SEAL team members reflected on what happened and concluded that Gallagher had to be held accountable. This decision set into motion the subsequent investigation, trial, and eventual Presidential pardon that, at times, consumed not only the platoon and the SEALs but also the entire Navy.

Needless to say, *Alpha* is an uncomfortable read, bringing to light some troubling cultural issues in a loosely supervised, largely autonomous part of the U.S. military. By telling this story, it provides invaluable insights into how an insular culture can be built, sustained, and ultimately abused by those entrusted to protect it. Some SEALs argue that Philipps unfairly implies that the SEAL cultural problems are more profound and widespread than the community assesses. Even if this is the case, and readers must judge for themselves, he compels joint force members to think more holistically about the building, maintenance, and oversight of small, elite units. In particular, three major issues for the joint force to address emerge in *Alpha*.

First, what is the role of company grade officers in elite units? In *Alpha*, the SEAL platoon leader is physically strong, seemingly brave under fire, but devoid of moral courage. Gallagher's failure to exercise leadership allows him and his toxic culture to flourish. Where does responsibility rest for this moral failure? With the junior officer, the training, the SEAL culture he joined, or all the above? Understanding and addressing this leadership shortcoming is essential not only to the development of future SEAL officers but also to determining the extent to which they shape the organization they ostensibly lead.

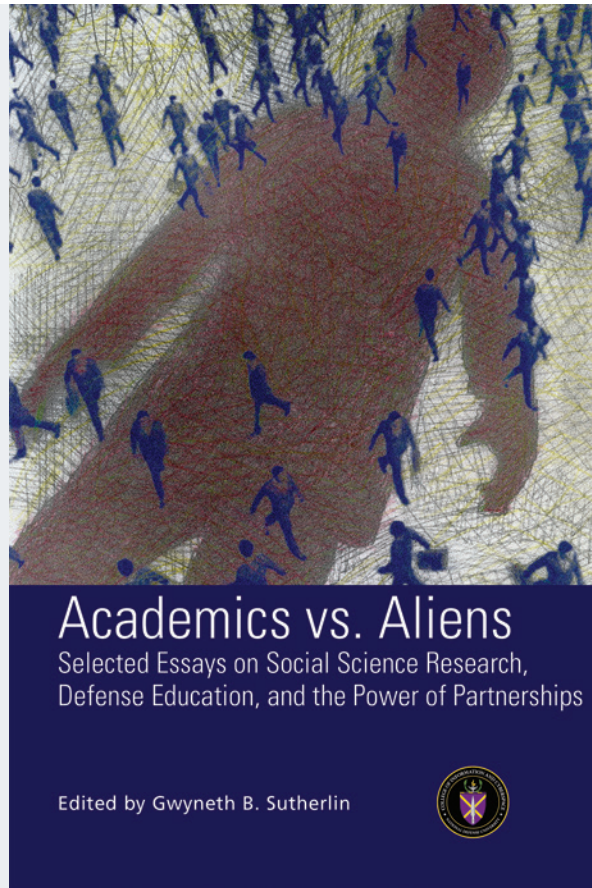
Second, closely tied to this leadership issue is a cultural one. Reading *Alpha*, we sense that SEALs are more akin to a professional sports team than a military unit—except kills, not goals, are the measure of the team's performance. This cultural nihilism belongs to the SEAL “pirate” subculture that dates to the Vietnam War. Pirates believe they are the true SEALs, who do the Nation's dirty work by rule-breaking, secrecy, and excessive killing. They are challenged at times by SEALs belonging to another, smaller subculture, the “boy scouts,” who believe they must operate under a code of law and order. Using Gallagher's case to highlight this tension, Philipps argues every SEAL must choose to belong to one subculture or the other; and since the 1970s, SEALs, including Gallagher, overwhelmingly have chosen the pirate culture. For the joint force, even discussing this construct is instructive. Some informal conversations with special operators indicate Philipps's characterization is on the mark. Others suggest that SEALs must simultaneously be pirates and boy scouts—a difficult task indeed. Thus, we must ask, where does, and should, the SEAL community's cultural epicenter rest, and what is the best way to nurture it?

Third, as a corollary, what are the SEALs doing to help young team members understand and develop moral courage to match their physical prowess? If a small fraction of the time devoted to rigorous physical training focused instead on this moral component, it could weaken the barrier between the pirate and boy scout subcultures. As important, it could better prepare young team members to deal with their own invisible wounds and help others do the same. If the SEALs, and special operators overall, want stronger organizational cultures, they need to pay heed to this moral dimension.

By flagging these issues, Philipps more than delivers to the joint force audience a well-written, infuriating account of Gallagher and a rogue SEAL platoon at war. Indeed, *Alpha* offers the reader a cautionary tale about how even the most elite units can lose their way when toxic culture, security classification, and lavish praise collectively undermine unit effectiveness

and accountability. Joint force leaders at all levels will finish this book powerfully reminded that high military effectiveness, healthy organizational culture, and leadership accountability are inextricably intertwined. Philipps did the joint force a huge service by creating such a vivid reminder of this crucial interrelationship. **JFQ**

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