

GRIM HARVEST

Review by Herbert Schlossberg

WAY OF THE REAPER: MY GREATEST UNTOLD MISSIONS AND THE ART OF BEING A SNIPER.

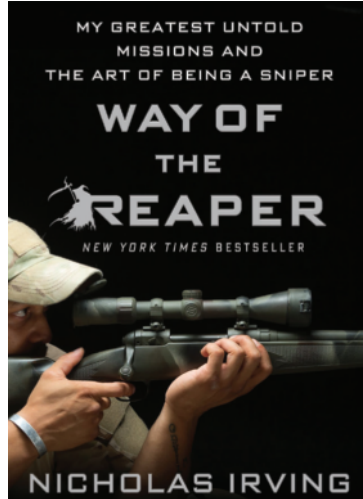
NICHOLAS IRVING, with GARY BROZEK, St. Martin's Pres, 2016, 304 pages.

On the surface Nicholas Irving's *Way of the Reaper* seems to be a typical shoot-'em-up memoir designed for men vicariously seeking adventure. But by the end of the book, Irving has turned reflective. To his evident surprise, experience on the battlefield finally sinks into his consciousness, enabling him to break through the studied callousness of the combat soldier and to turn himself into a case study on the role of battle in causing moral injury.

An African-American soldier, Irving (called "Irv" by his comrades) served his platoon in the 75th Ranger Regiment in various capacities, with the occupational specialty of sniper. So successful was he in the course of killing 33 armed militants that he gladly claimed the title of "reaper." Much of this is told in greater detail in his similarly titled previous memoir, *The Reaper*.

Irving practiced his specialty as a direct action sniper in support of Ranger night missions, typically tasked with the capture of high-value individuals. He also assisted interdiction missions that targeted weapons caches or illicit drug ventures used to support Taliban operations. Irving usually provided surveillance for his team using elevated terrain or rooftops, seeking out threats up to about 300 meters away. His ambition was to improve his skills so that he might qualify for further training toward the long-range version of the sniper profession.

For most of his time in Afghanistan, Irving did not depart from the



macho attitudes typical of elite combat soldiers. He writes of his "excitement of taking out a few more guys that night," or in other words, killing them. It would be unrealistic to expect a young infantryman to reflect much on the ethics of sniping or even to know that "sharpshooters" as far back as the American Civil War were actually held in abhorrence even by their own comrades in adjacent infantry units. Irving does know that there were critics of the ethics of sniping, and he emphatically, glibly, rejects those sentiments. Indeed, while the sentiments he attributes to the critics are superficial, so too are his own responses to them. Both are likely to be dismissed out of hand by any reader with a modicum of interest in the moral dilemmas that both sides ought to be considering.

Yet, there is another side to this hard young man who volunteered for, and succeeded in qualifying for, the hard duty of special operations missions. For instance, he acknowledges his fear of heights and hatred of parachuting. While

there is no way of knowing how widespread these feelings are in airborne units, this reviewer has known hundreds of paratroopers, but has no recollections of ever hearing one of them express similar fears. And yet Irving drops his macho tough talk and tells the world of his weakness. The reader can only admire the honesty of his self-revelation.

Toward the end of his tour of duty in Afghanistan, Irving and his platoon embarked on a typical night mission during which he killed several Taliban fighters. With a quick snap shot, he wounded one man who suddenly sprung up again unexpectedly and seemed, simply, to sit there lost in thought after the 7.62mm bullet struck him in the leg. Irving recollects:

He was an older guy, judging by the folds and wrinkles around his eyes. I swear he was looking at me and thinking, "So, okay, are you going to shoot me or what?"... I'd done all that training... and without warning or regret, something passed through me that had never before factored into my life as a sniper or soldier. I had this creeping belief that this was a variation on suicide by cop. All along this guy had been hoping that we'd end his life. He'd given us every opportunity, had wanted to make it difficult for us so that we wouldn't feel so bad.

Early in the book Irving tells us of the sniper's motto, undoubtedly intended to help avoid such thoughts as he was now having at this moment in the end of his combat career. "When I first heard the words 'Without warning; without remorse,' I didn't realize that remorse could ambush me without warning." The crisis of conscience that now overtook him was apparently the cause of his leaving the Army at the end of his enlistment rather than following through on his earlier intention to reenlist. "I had one question

that I pushed out of my mind until after I'd decided to leave the Army and begun finding comfort and courage in the bottom of too many bottles of booze: Was I a good man or a bad man?"

Such existentially desperate questions have been addressed in the pages of *Providence* before, including in essays by the managing editor Marc LiVecche and contributing editor Chaplain Timothy Mallard, US Army. These are good places to start for those wanting to

know something more about spiritual injuries in war. Irving's dependence on alcohol was followed by a suicide attempt, each being means borne of his attempt to answer that question about his own moral character. Like too many of our combat veterans, Irv was never wounded in the conventional sense, but he became a living example in the library of moral injury. P

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BOOK REVIEW

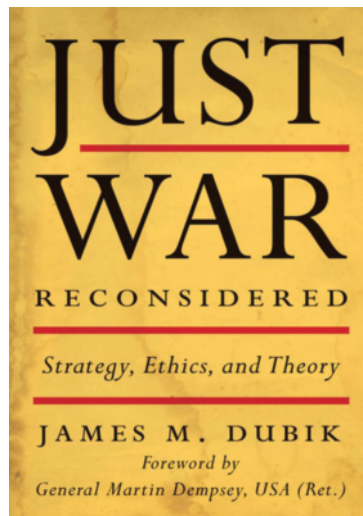
REVISING OR APPLYING THE JUST WAR TRADITION?

Review by J. Daryl Charles

JUST WAR RECONSIDERED: STRATEGY, ETHICS AND THEORY.

JAMES M. DUBIK, University Press of Kentucky, 2016, 225 pages.

Surely it was not a coincidence that my exposure to James M. Dubik's *Just War Reconsidered* coincided with my reading of a memoir by one of now retired Lt. General Dubik's esteemed U.S. Army colleagues. As Dubik informs the reader, General Stanley McChrystal, who commanded special operations forces in Iraq and later in Afghanistan, took the responsibilities for that command with utmost seriousness. During the dark period of the Iraq conflict in the mid-2000s, McChrystal agonized over the loss of life—to both Coalition forces and Iraqi civilians who were being murdered and mutilated by al-Qaeda and insurgent forces.



Amidst the stress of months-long, close-quarter combat, McChrystal called together his leaders, many of whom he had known for years. His plea was

emotional but straightforward. "Listen," he told them, "this really hurts. But let me tell you what would make these [losses of life] hurt even more: if it is all in vain."¹ Dubik, who at the time was serving as the commanding general of the Multi-National Security and Transition Command in Iraq, as well as a special advisor to several commanding generals,² has this to say: "What McChrystal's comments reveal...is that how these lives are used does matter."³ *How those lives are used, how their commanders use them, really matters.* This responsibility, Dubik concludes, derives from the fact that "soldiers, at least American soldiers, remain citizens and that the