

American Spartan: The Promise, The Mission, and the Betrayal of Special Forces Major Jim Gant¹

Reviewed by *Lieutenant Commander Naa Ayeley Akwei-Aryee**

*Remember: Whoever does me in will be wearing a U.S. Army uniform, with a Special Forces tab.*²

I. Introduction

A Spartan is a person of great courage and self-discipline, undaunted by pain or danger.³ This definition is apt to show how the reviewer views the principal character in *American Spartan*, Army Special Forces Major Jim Gant.⁴ Written by Ann Scott Tyson, the wife of Major Gant, it is a riveting true story of love, war, organizational failures, and human relationships.

Major Gant enlisted in the Army in 1986,⁵ straight out of high school. He passed the Special Forces selection in 1988,⁶ and, despite the injuries he sustained during his training, he pressed on until he attained the Green Beret.⁷ Gant later served as a communications sergeant in the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, and he received training as an intelligence analyst.⁸ In 1996, he commissioned as a second

lieutenant in the Infantry.⁹ He deployed to Afghanistan in 2003 and 2004, and he deployed to Iraq in 2006 and 2007.¹⁰

During his tours in Iraq, Gant became legendary among the Iraqi population for his love of the local people, and they returned his affection with fierce loyalty. Later, he earned the prestigious Silver Star for heroism in Iraq for leading his Special Forces team. Returning from Iraq, he distilled his theories on counterinsurgency into a monograph, titled *One Tribe At a Time: A Strategy For Success In Afghanistan*, which was read by important leaders like General David Petraeus¹¹ and Admiral Eric Olson.¹² High-level military officers like General Petraeus said “Gant was the perfect counterinsurgent,” and Admiral Olson believed that Gant held the key to winning the war in Afghanistan through Village Stability Operations.¹³ Gant’s paper served as a strategic catalyst and helped lay the groundwork for formulating a plan for raising local forces nationwide.

Although greatly admired, Gant’s unconventional tactics and flouting of the rules during his deployment in Iraq eventually proved too much. For example, Gant refused to delay a mission in order to allow military teams to clear the Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) he spotted on a route.¹⁴ He also consumed liquor in the mission area,¹⁵ and he was addicted to painkillers.¹⁶ On one occasion despite a lockdown imposed on U.S. troops because of anti-American protests, Gant left base.¹⁷ Ultimately, Gant was fired and

¹ ANN SCOTT TYSON, *AMERICAN SPARTAN: THE PROMISE, THE MISSION, AND THE BETRAYAL OF SPECIAL FORCES MAJOR JIM GANT* (2014).

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² *Id.* at 230, 301 (*quoting* Jim Gant).

³ MERRIAM-WEBSTER, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spartan> (last visited Sept. 3, 2014).

⁴ The author effectively piques the reader’s interest early on in the prologue when she describes the “ritual ceremony” performed by Gant by slitting long, deep gashes between the thumb and index finger of his left hand. TYSON, *supra* note 1, at 3. This instantly makes readers visualize his heroic exploits and the fact that he is willing to die for what he believes in.

⁵ TYSON, *supra* note 1 at 8.

⁶ *Id.* at 9.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ General Petraeus was in charge of U.S. military forces in the Middle East and Central Asia and head of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). *Id.* at 12. Petraeus was largely responsible for the Army’s new counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, Field Manual 3-24, published in December 2006. *Id.* at 24.

¹² *Id.* at 8. Admiral Olson was the Commander of U. S. Special Operations Command at the time Gant’s monograph was published.

¹³ Military operations at the village level to raise local defense forces, to bring in development opportunities, and create ties to district governments in Afghanistan. A grassroots initiative, it became the focus of the U.S. Special Forces, Navy SEAL, and Marine Special Operations Forces (Green Berets), Rangers, and Civil Affairs Soldiers. *Id.* at 374.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 51.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 52.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 80.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 283. He also hired mercenaries without approval from Higher Command and at times wrote his own Standard Operating Procedures.

stripped of his prized Special Forces tab after First Lieutenant (1LT) Thomas Roberts submitted a statement alleging that Gant had refused to report his own injuries after an IED explosion, used alcohol in the operational theatre, along with other acts of misconduct. Robert's claim prompted a formal investigation and eventually led to Gant's humiliating retirement.¹⁸

Instead of simply launching into the war in Afghanistan, the author begins by describing how she became a journalist. Tyson is an investigative journalist,¹⁹ and had been involved with significant work in China where freedom of speech is not guaranteed. She had also covered the war in Afghanistan since 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.²⁰ She was present in the war zone with Gant in 2003. Tyson uses this experience and competence as a veteran war correspondent and her experience in combat situations to write *American Spartan*. She is therefore able to catapult the reader into the combat zone with her impressive detail and she can express the sights and sounds of combat from her perspective. Tyson's writing enables the reader to visualize the scenes by creating a graphic presentation of gruesome fights with the Taliban and of the atmosphere that permeated the local Afghan community both for the Americans and the Afghans. This is worth commending as it gives facts which other sources unfamiliar with the region cannot chronicle.²¹ Tyson was also a correspondent for the *Washington Post*, and was present at important military briefings. She also had the additional opportunity to interview important figures such as General David Petraeus, Admiral Eric Olson, and Senator John McCain, among others prior to and during the writing of *American Spartan*.²² The reader admires her

resilience and perceives her as prepared to surmount any obstacle in order to carry her message.²³

II. Lessons Learned

The book describes, in real time, the harsh effects of combat on Soldiers. Gant has been in such intense combat that images keep flashing through his head.²⁴ He hears the voice of Hecate, the Greek goddess of war,²⁵ rummages through garbage, and sleeps fitfully.²⁶ He also imagines himself a reincarnated Spartan.²⁷ Tyson is able to portray how war wounds the minds of Soldiers and the vulnerability of even those who appear strong and unshakable like "Spartan Gant." "It is tempting to agree that this is one of the most troubling things that happen to elite troops after their country has kept them in combat for more than a decade."²⁸ This book is an important read for servicemembers; it brings home the point of combat stress and demonstrates that protracted stays in combat zones invariably have negative effects on the Soldier.

American Spartan is filled with instances of strong cords of friendship, trust, and displays of loyalty. For example, Gant and his men were practically adopted by Afghan families in the village in their area of operations.²⁹ The Mohmand tribal leader, Noor Afzhal, promised to protect Major Gant as he would his own son, and he was true to his word.³⁰ He was happy to admit that Gant made decisions for him.³¹ The tribal intelligence network routinely tipped off Gant and his men to danger, and gave them critical information which led to the capture of a target.³² The Americans and Afghans ate the same food.³³ This connection to the people struck General Petraeus, when he

¹⁸ 1LT Roberts submitted his statement in March of 2012. By the end of the year Gant had been reprimanded, stripped of his rank and his Special Forces tab and forced to retire. *Fall of Green Beret Officer Jim Gant: Drugs and Booze in Deadly Lands*, ABC NEWS (Jun. 25, 2014, 3:25 PM), <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/fall-green-beret-officer-jim-gant-drugs-booze/story?id=24301847>.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 6.

²⁰ *Id.* at 63.

²¹ Tyson includes some simple but useful maps at the beginning of the book before the prologue of the Konar and Mangwel village area where the Tribe lived, enabling the reader to visualize the setting for the book. *Id.* at 184-85. (pictures found between these pages). She also includes numerous photographs in the center of the book. These pictures tell their own story. They depict the close relationship that existed between Gant and his "father" Noor Afzhal, the other members of the Tribe, the Afghan locals, Afghan culture, and support the author's assertions. The picture of First Lieutenant Thomas Roberts is of particular significance as it enables the reader to put a face to the character that is so demonized by the author for submitting a statement to the military top brass accusing Jim of misconduct, prompting the formal investigation. *Id.* The author provides a powerful description and analysis of Pashtun culture. The reviewer indeed learned more about the Tribal culture in Afghanistan than had been learned years of listening to the news since the war began.

²² *Id.* at 25, 262.

²³ *Id.* She did some investigative journalism, covered Congress during the Clinton impeachment, and also wrote articles for the *Christian Science Monitor* after the September 11 terrorist attacks. *Id.* at 3. She uses these instances to staunchly establish her capability to write this book.

²⁴ *Id.* at 10. In November 2006 for example, the vehicle in which MAJ Gant was riding was hit by a massive IED and caught fire trapping him inside. His head and body were smashed against the windshield.

²⁵ *Id.* at 52.

²⁶ *Id.* at 251.

²⁷ *Id.* at 139, 140.

²⁸ *Id.* at back cover (quoting Gunner Sepp, a former Green Beret and co-author of *Weapon of Choice: U.S. Army Special Operations in Afghanistan*).

²⁹ *Id.* at 104.

³⁰ *Id.* at 107.

³¹ *Id.* at 193.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.* at 149.

visited the tribe, as extraordinary.³⁴ When Gant was suddenly removed from the operational theater, the local population made repeated attempts to make contact with him and maintain the relationship they had built even after Gant lost his command.³⁵

Throughout the book, Gant exhibits his love for his men.³⁶ It echoes Sun Tzu, in his book *The Art of War*,³⁷ when he notes, “Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look on them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death.” Gant’s men were prepared to stand by him because he had protected them like his own children.³⁸ Unfortunately, the men he led failed woefully to guide him or tell him where to stop, contributing to his fall in the military.

Although Gant was fired by the Army he so cherished and lost his coveted Special Forces tab,³⁹ the problems with Special Forces Operations are still very much alive. This is a book that would especially resonate with people who are interested in Special Forces. However, the lessons are timeless and applicable to all in uniform. Tyson has contributed immensely to the unearthing of red flags that exist in operations, such as failures of organizational leadership.

Unfortunately, why Gant was allowed to stay in combat is a question left unanswered. Commanders who seized on his fresh ideas, skills, and reputation did not look out for his welfare. Perhaps it goes to show how selfish those in the higher echelons can be. Some leaders may care about their own rising star at the expense of those who work under them. Though Gant spoke openly about his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to his chain of command, it was blatantly ignored.⁴⁰ Even after he was involved in an IED explosion, he was not taken out of the combat zone.

The military bureaucracy had their opening to criticize Gant after the investigation into his alleged misconduct began and when Gant’s “godfathers”⁴¹ exited the scene. There were those who had clearly resented him when he was singled out and praised for his heroic exploits and the success of his operations. Special Forces Colonel Mark Schwartz, who had previously recommended Gant for promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel,⁴² changed his tone to one of shock and disgust after the investigations into the alleged misconduct of Gant began, calling his actions “inexcusable” and “despicable.”⁴³ Lieutenant General John Mulholland, who previously offered to give his full support to Gant and his team,⁴⁴ openly lambasted Gant and called him a disgrace to the Special Forces. Lieutenant General Mulholland feared that reports in the tabloids would be similar to those that covered Vietnam after the war,⁴⁵ and he underscores the fact that political use of the military still occurs. Gant’s superiors were so bent on protecting the image of the Special Forces from the reputation of a rogue outfit that they sacrificed one of their own.⁴⁶ They considered it better for Gant to be sent away than to tarnish the image of the force.

During his final tour in Afghanistan, his command failed to advance Gant additional funds for operations to train the *Arbakai*.⁴⁷ Gant therefore had to resort to borrowing heavily from the very people that he was tasked to help. Requests for basic needs to keep his unit alive were routinely denied.⁴⁸ Gant and his unit had asked for air support on several occasions during attacks and received no support, yet two separate helicopters were sent to pick up Captain Dan McKone, who was Gant’s Second-in-Command, and Gant after the investigation.⁴⁹

³⁴ *Id.* at 208.

³⁵ The distortion on their faces when he was picked up, the quest of the large group of elders to ask for Gant’s return, the support given to Tyson to sneak her out of the camp, and her protection are all instances that support the strong theme of friendship. *Id.* at 308, 325. Gant’s second-in-command, Dan McKone, was also prepared to go to jail with Gant. *Id.* at 308.

³⁶ *Id.* at 308, 311 (“I will go to prison for you I will die for you.”). *Id.*

³⁷ SUN TZU, *THE ART OF WAR* (1913) (ancient Chinese military general and tactician).

³⁸ The author of this review finds this particularly intriguing as it brings to light the fact that even in war, when friendships must be sacrificed at the altar of battle, friendships are instead built and stand the test of time.

³⁹ TYSON, *supra* note 1, at 350 (“The proudest day of my life.”). *Id.* at 130.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 92.

⁴¹ The reviewer used the word “godfathers” to note that Gant found support and inspiration from others like he had found in General Petraeus and Admiral Olson.

⁴² *Id.* at 337.

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 59.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 344. Mulholland says, “The politics of this are an absolute nightmare.” *Id.*

⁴⁶ Joseph Collins, *War on the Rocks*, available at <http://warontherocks.com/author/joseph-collins/> (last visited Sept. 5, 2014).

⁴⁷ A traditional Afghan tribal police force, especially prevalent in eastern Afghanistan, that protects tribal territory and upholds the decisions of tribal leaders. Tyson, *supra* note 1, at 369.

⁴⁸ TYSON, *supra* note 1, at 292. For example, Gant was not given resources to build observation posts, money to hire donkeys to help ferry supplies, tents, blankets, ammunition, and heavy weapons. *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 316. There was an investigation into the allegations of the conduct of MAJ Gant. The allegations included alcohol consumption in theatre, misuse of pain medication, misappropriation of government funds, misuse of fuel, falsifying documents and a potential inappropriate relationship with Ms. Ann Tyson. *Id.* at 299.

Points of special interest to the judge advocate (JA) are not so nicely packaged in the book; however, their impact is felt. For example, the unit JA read Major Gant his rights and told him what he was to do and not to do.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the JA was consulted before punishment was meted out to Major Gant.⁵¹ Judge advocates will continue to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq and other parts of the world. It is important that they understand some of the discipline problems that rear their ugly heads in the operational theater.⁵²

III. Negative Aspects of *American Spartan*

“When one is in love, a cliff becomes a meadow.”⁵³ This is exactly how Tyson portrays her unflinching support for Gant. Her admiration for him is cast in stone.⁵⁴ She unapologetically loses her journalistic objectivity,⁵⁵ and her bias is evident due to her relationship with him. Any attack on him affects her and hence her inability to hide her emotions. Tyson lived clandestinely with Gant while in the operational theater. Living with Gant in a war zone was unethical in military circles and ran contrary to the rules and regulations of the mission. Furthermore, Tyson was secretly engaging in combat operations.⁵⁶ At times it is difficult to decipher if the writer is a reporter, an author, a lover, or a soldier.⁵⁷

Tyson praises Gant and rationalizes his addictions. For example, she still believes that Gant was not a danger to himself or to others, even after he put the barrel of his AK-

47 rifle in his mouth and pulled the trigger.⁵⁸ Furthermore, she desperately tries to rationalize the presence of pornographic pictures in the room she shared with Gant by indicating that it was a common occurrence in the operational setting,⁵⁹ and that the possession of alcohol was a norm rather than the exception.⁶⁰ Though Gant recognized his own shortcomings and lack of discipline, the writer does not. She argues that Gant’s misdeeds were ultimately unsubstantial and particularly irrelevant when weighed against the service he rendered to his country.⁶¹ She portrays that whether Gant is a victim or a hero is in the eyes of the beholder, and for her the latter holds sway.

She uses the epilogue as an important literary tool to add insight to interesting developments in the war, and to try to convince the reader that her hero should be everyone’s hero too, especially since Osama bin Laden had read Gant’s article, *One Tribe At A Time*, mentioned him by name in propaganda, and considered him an impediment to Al Qaeda’s operational objectives.⁶² Proclaiming Gant a hero at all costs and laying blame at the doorsteps of everyone who dissented considerably diminishes her objectivity.

The author professes her admiration for the military,⁶³ but this must be measured against her unabated bashing of the military. From the onset, she compares the challenge of reporting on the armed forces to news gathering in China.⁶⁴ Tyson identifies numerous challenges in the armed forces such as bureaucracy and extreme mistrust of outsiders.⁶⁵ However, she falls short in her understanding of the military in general. The military is about law, order, and discipline—principles that Gant was unable to uphold.⁶⁶ Moral courage and candor are essentials for any organization to thrive. Their absence prevents wrongs from being righted. A professional officer must question and disobey unlawful

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 320.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 345.

⁵² The author of this review has served on a number of UN Peacekeeping Operations and has advised commanders on disciplinary measures for soldiers and officers who contravene standing orders of the camp, and therefore identifies that such problems exist in every operational setting.

⁵³ *Ethiopian Saying, Old Sayings and Proverbial Wisdom*, HISTORY OF PAINTERS, http://www.historyofpainters.com/ethiopia_proverbs.htm (last visited Sept. 4, 2014). Ethiopian proverb, meaning love makes insurmountable things look easy. *Id.*

⁵⁴ TYSON, *supra* note 1, at 126. She mentions that she had met hundreds of military officers who were talented, brave, and smart, but none driven by his love for his men as Gant.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 82 (“As most would view it, I crossed over to the dark side professionally by becoming involved with Jim, and he with me. I saw it differently.”).

⁵⁶ Collins, *supra* note 46.

⁵⁷ TYSON, *supra* note 1, at 288 (“Take him off the gun.”); *id.* (Picture of the author cleaning weapons after training and posing playfully with Gant’s M4 carbine and AK47 rifles), *id.* at 303. She learned how to fire almost every weapon. She wore military fatigues and her job was to pass ammunition to the gunner.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 256.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 302, 335.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 335.

⁶¹ James Norton, *American Spartan*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Apr. 24, 2014, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/Book-Reviews/2014/0424/American-Spartan>.

⁶² TYSON, *supra* note 1, at 359.

⁶³ *Id.* at 7 (explaining how impressed Tyson was by the sacrifices that those in uniform made by leaving their families time and again to go where they had been ordered).

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 8, 38, 52, 63, 80, 100, 131, 241, 290, 294–95. Gant’s hair was too long, and he kept sideburns that were not in regulation; unlawfully outfitted the locals; frequented whorehouses; engaged in fistfights; engaged in self-medication and used drugs; wore unauthorized shoulder patches; wrote his own Standard Operating Procedures; failed to report to his higher command; hired mercenaries; and armed the *arbakai* with weapons meant for U.S. Soldiers, among other infractions.

orders. Consequently, Tyson's apparent dislike for young 1LT Roberts, who reported Gant's misconduct, is unfounded. Her personal animosity is seen in the prose she uses to describe Roberts.⁶⁷ Her sarcasm is evident when she asserts that he was hailed by the chain of command as a whistle-blower and a paragon of moral courage.⁶⁸ She tries to cover up her bias by stating that he was detested by others as well.⁶⁹ In the glossary, she again highlights the contribution of the young lieutenant to the downfall of Gant.⁷⁰

IV. Conclusion

Ann Tyson's *American Spartan* is an invigorating read for military and civilian alike. Despite her bias, the book offers a unique perspective on love, war, loyalty, and organizational failure. As a veteran war correspondent, Tyson offers an unparalleled account of the conflict in Afghanistan while discussing friendship, unwavering loyalty, and the harsh effect of combat on Soldiers. In a world dominated by wars, the book will have influence for both the military and policy makers. The war in Afghanistan still rages, and an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Gant's strategy are still very useful. "Achilles absent, is Achilles still."⁷¹

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 341 (describing Roberts as an inexperienced officer who was insecure and uncomfortable with the leadership qualities possessed by Gant).

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 317.

⁷⁰ *Id.* at 364.

⁷¹ *Id.* at 355. Although Achilles is not present, his presence is still felt through his influence on those who remain. Achilles makes this statement to Hector after mortally wounding him to avenge his friend, Patroclus, whom Hector had killed while Patroclus wore Achilles's armor. Achilles was not present in battle when Hector killed his friend, yet Achilles influenced the battle and Hector should have known that Achilles would avenge the act and kill Hector. *Id.* The reviewer used this to underscore the importance of Gant and what he stands for. Though no longer in the Army, his presence will still be felt for years to come.