

BRANDON LINGLE

Jon Krakauer's *Where Men Win Glory*: Pat Tillman as American Epic Hero

On Memorial Day 2005, my childhood, high-school, and college buddy—Air Force Captain Derek Argel—died in a plane crash just south of the Iranian border in Iraq's Diyala Province. Derek, a Special Tactics Officer—the Air Force version of Delta Force or Navy SEALs—had pinned on his captain's bars just minutes before boarding that plane. In the days that followed I grieved with his family and friends. Since then I've watched how the narrative of Derek's life has morphed and shaped itself. You could say Derek is a hero, and in the years since his death, his life's hero narrative has consumed nearly everything he did—right or wrong, good or bad—regardless of facts.

The commingled remains of Derek and his crewmates interred at Arlington lie under a headstone exponentially larger than the typical granite block. Today, the aquatics center at Hurlburt Field—Air Force Special Operations' headquarters—bears his name, as does the Academy War Memorial. The Air Force Academy Water Polo team annually recognizes a senior cadet with a memorial award, and Lompoc, California's Cabrillo High School displays a commemorative plaque. A few years ago I set out to construct a display honoring Derek in his Academy squadron. People clamored with support. Derek's Special Operations colleagues donated thousands of dollars worth of gear, the Academy procured a six-foot oak-and-glass display case, and more than 300 hundred people attended the dedication.

The only hesitation came from an officer who asked why I was trying to recognize a Bronze Star recipient in the same manner the Academy honors Air Force Cross

and Medal of Honor winners. The officer said Derek died in an airplane crash, just as hundreds of other Academy graduates have perished, and wondered why he deserved special recognition. While the question frustrated me, the officer raised an interesting point. Derek received a Bronze Star, but no Purple Heart. The military tallied the crash as a training accident with no hostile action, and the investigation board results were inconclusive. They attributed the small aircraft crash—that killed four Americans and an Iraqi—to “landing irregularities.” If anyone knows what really happened to that aircraft, they’re keeping quiet.

This experience reinforced my conviction that the circumstances of one’s death do not necessarily dictate heroism. I believe that all who perish in service of our country—whether by combat, accident, suicide, or illness—deserve recognition, and this becomes quite controversial in my senior war literature courses. About a year before Derek’s death, NFL star turned soldier, Specialist Patrick Tillman died in Afghanistan. Tillman, the long-haired, free-thinking, and hard-hitting Arizona Cardinal “walked away from his \$3.6 million NFL contract to enlist in the [US] Army.”²¹ We all know the rest of the story... Tillman goes down in a blaze of glory on a desolate Afghan mountain battling hardened Taliban fighters. He becomes the poster child of the War on Terrorism, a model of patriotism, sacrifice, and honor. A real American Hero, someone our kids should aspire to. Only later did we learn someone from Tillman’s own unit gunned him down in a sickening case of fratricide. And later still did we learn how the Army and government conspired to hide the tragic truth.

Jon Krakauer’s *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman* tries to get at the truth of who Tillman was, what motivated him, and what happened to him. In 344 pages Krakauer traces Tillman’s life from bright athletic kid raised in Almaden, California making standard adolescent mistakes, to idealistic student athlete at Arizona State, to NFL overachiever, and finally duty-bound soldier. Along the way, Krakauer weaves in histories of Afghanistan, US involvement in the Middle East, and a chronology of the War on Terror. This back and forth structure warns that Middle-East conflict will eventually converge with Tillman.

Krakauer systematically deconstructs the myth of Pat Tillman’s heroic demise perpetuated by the government and media in the months following his death. Tillman’s Silver Star citation captures the image concisely:

Corporal Tillman put himself in the line of devastating enemy fire as he maneuvered his Fire Team to a covered position from which they could effectively employ their weapons on known enemy positions. While mortally wounded, his

audacious leadership and courageous example under fire inspired his men to fight with great risk to their own personal safety, resulting in the enemy's withdrawal and his platoon's safe passage from the ambush kill zone. Corporal Tillman's personal courage, tactical expertise, and professional competence directly contributed to this platoon's overall success and survival.²

Or, consider Navy SEAL Steve White's eulogy at Tillman's funeral: "[Pat] made the call. He dismounted his troops, taking the fight to the enemy, uphill, to seize the tactical high ground [...] This gave his brothers [...] time to move off that target. He directly saved their lives with that move. Pat sacrificed himself so his brothers could live." Krakauer writes societies "present their fallen warriors as heroes who made the ultimate sacrifice for a noble cause. But death by so-called friendly fire, [...] doesn't conform to this mythic narrative."³ Krakauer simultaneously builds the image of a new hero independent of his downfall—hearkening to the ancients, an epic hero—while indicting the government and a hero-hungry society.

Take the book's title, *Where Men Win Glory*, illuminated in the preface with an epigraph from Richard Lattimore's translation of *The Iliad*: "Who among mortal men are you, good friend? Since / never before have I seen you in the fighting where / men win glory, yet now you have come striding far / out in front of all others in your great heart..."⁴ Here, the youngest Achaean commander, Diomedes—courageous enough to wound two gods—taunts the Trojan Glaucus. In the following lines, the two nearly duel, but end up exchanging their armor after recognizing their families are friends. However, Diomedes exchanges bronze armor for Glaucus' gold, ripping the Trojan off "the worth of a hundred oxen for just nine."⁶ The exchange gave birth to the term "Diomedean Swap," where only one side benefits. Krakauer's title and epigraph then implicitly indicts the US government as knowingly trying to benefit from Tillman's service and demise.

Or, take the book's subtitle, *The Odyssey of Pat Tillman*, a nod toward another Greek epic. Krakauer quotes Susan Neiman's *Moral Clarity*:

... next to heroes like Odysseus and Penelope, the gods seem oddly flat. They are bigger, of course, and they live forever, but their presence seems diminished... The gods of *The Odyssey* aren't alive, just immortal; and with immortality most of the qualities we cherish become pointless. With nothing to risk, the gods need no courage."

Tillman, of course, risked and lost everything. Krakauer later points out that Tillman was reading *The Odyssey* in Iraq with no “knowledge of the tragedy beginning to unfold in Nasiriyah [the ambush of Private Jessica Lynch’s convoy], nor could he have imagined that its aftershocks would one day be a source of unceasing torment to the people he loved.”⁸

Besides glancing references to classic Greek epics, Krakauer builds Tillman as an epic hero through amazing characterization and cataloging of his life. Critics Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg argue that one epic core tenet is “the chronicle of the deeds of the hero,” and “the epic plot is to a certain extent bespoken by epic characterization. The plot is inherent in the concept of the protagonist.”⁹ Krakauer spends most of his time explicating Tillman’s life in favor of a specific image. We learn that Pat was “animated and adventurous right out of the womb [...and] started walking at eight and a half months.”¹⁰ He “learned to trust in himself, and be unafraid to buck the herd,”¹¹ and “wasn’t easily diverted”¹² from his goals. He had an “insatiable appetite for spirited dialogue,” yet was “conscientious about learning and generally well-behaved in class.”¹³ The Tillman boys learned to “tell the truth, to respect their elders, to stand up for the vulnerable, [...] to keep their promises [...] and] the importance of defending their honor, with their fists if necessary.”¹⁴

Pat “inherited superlative athletic genes [...] began playing [...] soccer at [...] four.”¹⁵ He joined the football team “despite his diminutive size,” and “excelled at every position.”¹⁶ Pat lacked fear and would fight “when challenged,” yet was the “antithesis of a bully,” and “intervened to rescue nerdy classmates.”¹⁷ Despite the nail-tough exterior “beneath the armor was a sensitive kid who was easily moved to tears in private.”¹⁸ Krakauer describes Pat as “a conspicuously handsome young man, with chiseled features and a magnetic smile,” yet he was not a stereotypical jock, but an intellectual, innocent, and introspective young man, a “swinger of birches.”¹⁹ He respected his mother, and eventually married his high-school sweetheart.

Pat earns a college scholarship, suffers homesickness, excels at football, plays in the Rose Bowl, climbs two-hundred foot light towers to find peace, jumps from cliffs, graduates summa cum laude, travels to Europe, and gets drafted into the NFL. He’s conservative with money, a compulsive reader, and defender of the “little guy.” He runs triathlons and marathons in the NFL off season, and becomes one of the most accomplished strong safeties in the league. Described as a loyal man of principle without a price he turned down a five-year \$9.6 million contract from the Rams to stay with the Cardinals yearly \$512,000 contract. Krakauer describes Pat as “agnostic, perhaps even an atheist, but the Tillman family creed [...] imparted to him an overarching sense of values that included a belief in the transcendent

importance of continually striving to better oneself—intellectually, morally, and physically.²⁰ These values lead Tillman to abandon his football career in favor of serving in the US Army despite the serious concern of his family and friends. Pat recognizes the pain he's causing and writes about his wife in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy; he calls her a "superhero—actually a greek tragedy heroine."²¹

Northrop Frye asserts that epic heroes are "superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment."²² We can identify with these figures because they are "unmistakenly human, not a god or even godlike," they are "capable of error, even of sin," and are "vulnerable to the assaults of other humans and of the natural world."²³ Tillman of course falls victim to the "assaults of other humans" and his environment. Krakauer cites *A Culture of Atrocity*: acknowledging that "war is always about betrayal."²⁴ One form of betrayal—a terrifying embodiment of modern warfare—is fratricide, and we learn "the first three members of the American military to die in the Afghanistan war were victims of fratricide."²⁵

The more damning betrayal is the government's urge to hide fratricide. Krakauer sees many parallels in the stories of Private Jessica Lynch and Tillman. Lynch's story also fell victim to the White House's strategic communication perception managers. The young female soldier did not go down fighting, and was not tortured by her captures, as the US government led us to believe. Krakauer cites British newspaper accounts that "the Iraqi staff at the hospital treated Lynch well [...] hospital personnel even donated two pints of their own blood to give her."²⁶ An Iraqi doctor "put Lynch in an ambulance and instructed the driver to drop her off at a nearby American military checkpoint, but Marines shot at the ambulance as it approached, forcing it to turn around."²⁷ Her rescuers faced minimal resistance, hardly the harrowing mission conveyed by the media. Tillman—who didn't agree with the Iraq War—was on standby as part of the Lynch reaction force, and wrote that the rescue seemed "to be a big Public Relations stunt."²⁸ And Krakauer asserts the government trumped up the Lynch rescue to conceal the fact "that seventeen [...] Marines were killed by [...] Air Force jets on the fourth day of the Iraq war."²⁹

Krakauer's epic-hero theme breaks down in the end. Tillman's comrades kill him, and nearly all levels of military and government leadership conspire to hide the tragedy. Krakauer writes "it might be tempting to regard Tillman's resounding alpha maleness as his Achilles' heel," or "a function of his stubborn idealism—his insistence on trying to do the right thing," that led to his demise.³⁰ Krakauer continues "it wasn't a tragic flaw that brought Tillman down, but a tragic virtue."³¹ Here, Krakauer implicates society's desire for heroes. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, writes:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.³²

While Tillman ventured from “the world of the common day,” he does not earn a “decisive victory” or return from this “mysterious adventure.” And, if his story bestows boons on his fellow man they are warnings of senseless sacrifice and conspiracy. Campbell continues that the hero “and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolical deficiency. In fairy tales this may be as slight as the lack of a certain golden ring, whereas in apocalyptic vision the physical and spiritual life of the whole earth can be represented as fallen, or on the point of falling into ruin.”³³ In the end, Tillman’s story warns against our culture’s often damaging need for heroes. As long as we blindly grasp for the hero narrative, governments and other hierarchies will offer appealing stories that blur and hide the truth. With Jessica Lynch, Pat Tillman saw what would happen if he became a war casualty, and said “I don’t want them to parade me through the streets.”³⁴ Unfortunately, we paid no mind to Pat Tillman’s wish.

Notes

1. Jon Krakauer, *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), jacket.
2. Mike Fish, “An Un-American Tragedy, Part 2 – Playing with Friendly Fire,” *ESPN.com*, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/eticket/story?page=tillmanpart2>
3. *Ibid.*
4. Krakauer, xxiii.
5. Homer, *The Iliad* lines 123-126, qtd. in *Where Men Win Glory*, preface.
6. Homer, *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fagles, Ed. Bernard Knox (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), line 282 p. 203.
7. Krakauer, xxvi.
8. *Ibid.*, 184.
9. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford, 1966), p. 209.
10. Krakauer, 16.
11. *Ibid.*

12. Ibid., 4.
13. Ibid., 16.
14. Ibid., 20.
15. Ibid., 16.
16. Ibid., 16-17.
17. Ibid., 20-21.
18. Ibid., 20.
19. Ibid., 34-35.
20. Ibid., 116.
21. Ibid., 160.
22. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, (Princeton, 1957), p.33.
23. Roger B. Rollin, "Beowulf to Batman: The Epic Hero and Pop Culture," *College English*, 31.5 (1970), 435.
24. Krakauer, 133.
25. Ibid., 126.
26. Ibid., 209.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 211.
30. Ibid., 344.
31. Ibid.
32. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato: New World, 2008), 23.
33. Ibid., 30.
34. Krakauer, 295.

BRANDON LINGLE'S award-winning writing and photography has appeared in more than twenty publications including **WLA**, *The North American Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, *Mississippi Review*, *Redivider*, *CutBank*, *Adirondack Review*, *Juked*, *Blue Earth Review*, and *Hot Metal Bridge*. He serves as **WLA's** Art Director and Nonfiction Editor.