

Interview with Master Sergeant Michael W. Howland: The War in Afghanistan



Master Sergeant Michael W. Howland (MSG) is currently Senior Military Instructor for the award-winning University of Mississippi ROTC program. MSG Howland entered active duty in the United States Army in 1988 when he enlisted as an Infantryman and graduated from Basic/AIT and Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia. In 2000, he was assigned to US Army Special Operations Command, where he served until being assigned to the Rebel Battalion at the University of Mississippi in June 2010. MSG Howland served two separate tours of duty in Afghanistan. Some of MSG Howland's military decorations include the Bronze Star Medal with one Oak Leaf, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Joint Service Commendation Medal, Army Commendation Medal with eight Oak Leaf Clusters, Southwest Asia

Service Medal with two Bronze Stars, Saudi Arabia/Kuwait Liberation Medal, Kuwait Liberation Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal with one Bronze Campaign Star, and Iraq Campaign Medal with three Bronze Campaign Stars. Howland has been awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge (second award), Expert Infantryman Badge, Master Parachutist Badge, Pathfinder Badge, Air Assault Badge, and the Army Gold Recruiter badge with three Sapphires. In the following interview, MSG Howland discusses what he thinks teachers and students should know about the war in Afghanistan. The answers are his personal opinions and not necessarily those of the US military. Knowledge was also gained from the personal insights of others with whom he served. Thanks go to Peter Frost for suggesting MSG Howland as an interviewee.

Lucien: *What was your job in Afghanistan?*

MSG Howland: I was assigned to a task force after the invasion of Afghanistan that was tasked with finding high value targets of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Lucien: *What do you think is important for teachers and students to know about al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the war in Afghanistan?*

MSG Howland: The easiest answer is the most simple. Most understand that the Taliban harbored al-Qaeda, allowed them free reign to plan their attacks on US interests around the world and, ultimately, the US itself on 9/11. The correct decision was made that the only way to defeat this clear and present danger was to invade the country and change the dynamic that allowed al-Qaeda to flourish, as well as to dismantle their infrastructure. The need to ensure that terrorists are not provided safe harbors to plan and execute terrorist acts cannot be understated and should be, in my opinion, the first reason given for the war itself.

Lucien: *What are some major points you think teachers and students should know about Afghans who are not insurgents?*

MSG Howland: In my opinion, most Afghans are not insurgents. Many are normal people with families who are unlucky enough to live in an area that has insurgents in it. This creates a conflict of interest because the insurgents have no qualms about threatening the lives of these people if they help coalition forces. Having said that, the struggle is getting the Afghans to take responsibility for their future by turning in these insurgents to create a safer place. Of course, when you have lived like this for longer than most can recall, it shouldn't surprise anyone.

Lucien: *What other factors would you like to see teachers, professors, and their students consider when they teach or learn about the Coalition Forces and their objectives in Afghanistan?*

MSG Howland: The most important thing to know about war is that nothing is simple. While the military mission is to "find, fix, and finish" Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, I feel we also have a nonmilitary responsibility to assist the Afghan people in creating a self-sustaining government to keep the Taliban from returning to power and, ultimately, recreating the same dynamic that allowed Al-Qaeda and terrorism to flourish. This will prove our greatest challenge.

After 24 years of service and multiple tours of combat, I know the world is not a simple place. The mistake we make as Americans is that we try to

project our logic on others' cultures, and we can't understand why these other cultures don't do things the way we would. Students and teachers need to know that coalition forces are doing their best to consider those differences as we help the Afghan people create a new government and a safer place to live. ■

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