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Recently, I wrote a short [piece](#) for the Atlantic Council's Art of Future Warfare Project about the importance of fiction in the professional development of military leaders. Immediately following its publication, authors and publishers began sending me copies of their books to review. Unfortunately, I don't have the time to take advantage of all of these great opportunities. However, one author in particular, wrote me and asked if I would be interested in reading his newly published book about the life of a boy whose father died in combat in Afghanistan. Because I'm a father to a young son, and a combat arms officer, I

agreed to read his book. I picked it up the day after Thanksgiving, and I could not put it down.

Andy Symonds' novel, [My Father's Son](#), follows the life and the struggles of 13-year-old Nathan Butler and his family following the death of his father, a Navy SEAL, in Afghanistan. The book covers a five year period in which Nathan must work through the complications of being a teenager, without the support of his dad. With each page, the reader is pulled deeper into the Butlers' world. Symonds does an excellent job of bringing to life all of his characters and the lifestyle of a military family — from Steven Butler's closest teammates, who help raise Nathan, to Gayle Butler, Nathan's mom, who must deal with the unexpected loss of Steven, her husband, while continuing to raise her children.

While the author uses flashbacks sparingly to introduce readers to the deceased Steven Butler, we get to know him from the stories told by his wife, his fellow Navy SEALs, and through the voice of the young man that Nathan grows into over the course of five years. It is the critical life lessons that his father passed down to him that help Nathan navigate, successfully, some of his rebellious periods during high school. This aspect of the book struck a chord with me. It brought home the importance of spending quality time with my son and creating experiences that will help him develop into a man of character.

There are several emotionally charged moments in the story, and I'm fairly certain I got some dust in my eyes while reading them. I found that one of the toughest parts to read in *My Father's Son* was the morning when Nathan and his family received that fateful ring of the doorbell that every family member of a deployed Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine dreads. It was this scene and others that made me pause and reflect on the sacrifices our families make so that we can serve our country.

I really appreciated the realism of many of the characters that Symonds' created. More times than not, characters in military fiction are stereotypical archetypes, which comes

across as cheesy to those of us in uniform. In his book, *Men at War: What Fiction Tells us About Conflict, From the Iliad to Catch-22*, Christopher Coker argues, “In war, real people are not so easily slotted into symbolic frameworks; in great literature the characters we remember are so complex that they do not always know themselves.” I would argue that what Andy Symonds has written is a great work of literature, filled with complex characters.

I cannot say enough good things about this book. This is one of the best works of military fiction I have read. I found myself reading well into the night, wanting everything to work out for the Butlers. The author touches on so many issues that are inherent to raising a family in the military. As we move closer to the holidays, and people are making their wish lists, I encourage them to add *My Father's Son*. In the tradition of Pat Conroy's *The Great Santini*, I think Andy Symonds' book will soon become a classic.

Check out an [excerpt](#) of Andy's book via *Task and Purpose*!

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