

# New Flash Fiction from Mary Doyle: "Triple X"

It's zero-three hundred and I'm yanked out of a sleep so deep I wake thrashing and fighting like a marlin at the end of a hook. It takes me a minute to figure out why. Then the sounds of raw, unrestrained sex slap me further awake.

The anger flashes immediately but I try to reign it in, to give it a minute to dissipate. I'm in such shocked disbelief at what I'm hearing, the offending noise so wrong, I'm hoping someone will come to their senses and the problem will correct itself.

When that doesn't happen I toss and turn. The volume is disastrously high. It bounces around the tents, reverberating throughout this end of the camp. I begin to think they're doing it on purpose.

I lay there, my fury building. Should I?

"Oh my god," a woman a couple of cots down from me mumbles, turns over, slamming a pillow over her head.

That's it. I have no choice. I'm the senior non-commissioned officer in my tent. It's my duty.

I shove my bare feet into my boots, throw on my grey hoodie with the four big letters spelling Army on the front. I stomp over to the tent next door and pound on the flimsy excuse for a door before storming in uninvited, strafing them with my senior-leader glare.



“Turn that shit down. NOW!”

They turn to face me. They are shirtless, in shorts, sweatpants, t-shirts and flip flops. All of them wear the shock of interruption. One dives and fumbles for the remote.

*Oh yeah. Oh baby. Harder, harder,* and the rhythmic slap of naked skin on skin weakens. The seams of the sharp night air, ripped open by the echoes of the graphic sounds, slip back together across the camp.

They are Scouts, just returned from patrol. Defiant, young boy-men who glower through ancient eyes. They hate me right now, but too bad. They are soldiers. They respond to my authority even though I'm not wearing any rank and my bed hair probably looks horrific.

I take a second to look at each of them, memorizing their faces. Three are huddled over a poncho spread out on the floor, a disassembled SAW laid out where they were cleaning the complicated weapon, piece by piece. Two others are leaning over a bucket, scrub brushes in one hand, their other arms shoved almost elbow deep into mud covered boots. Another one is standing in front of a small mirror hanging from a nail on a post, his bald head covered in shaving cream, a plastic razor in his hand.

Not one of them is sitting in front of the small TV in the corner with the built in VCR.

They follow the lead of the man I assume is their sergeant. Those that aren't already, stand slowly, arms folding behind their backs, going to parade rest, further proof of their submission to my will.

I'm working to keep the anger in my voice now. Exhaustion, physical and emotional, feels like a cartoon anvil on a rope hanging above us, the rope fraying, all of us in danger of being crushed by it. I have no idea what they have done, what they have seen this day.

"I live next door. There are ten women in that tent," I say. The gruff rebuke sounds genuine to my ears, if a bit forced.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Keep it down now."

"Yes, Sergeant."

I turn my back on them and walk out. My boots feel like bricks as I kick them off and climb back into my rack, deflated. The mumbled '*thank yous*' that drift to me through the anonymous dark don't lessen the buzzing in my head.

The clock glows zero three twenty. Behind my heavy lids I see them staring at me. Young men flattened by fatigue, with eyes as rusted as the spent casings they've left behind in their work.

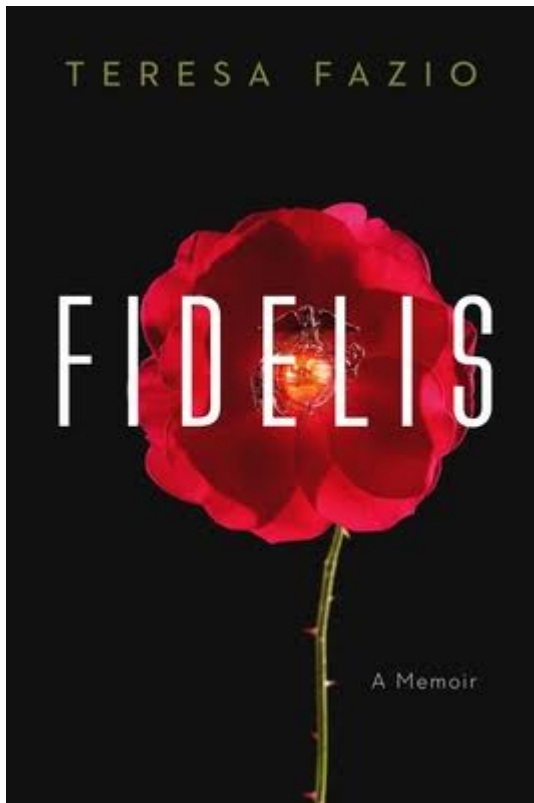
A guilt dagger in my gut makes me want to curl into a ball, but the metal sides of my cot won't allow it. I throb with unleashed emotion. Grief? Regret? I don't know. Whatever it is, it tastes sour.

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# Loyal to the Corps: A Review of Teresa Fazio's 'Fidelis'

The motto of the U.S. Marine Corps, or USMC, is "Semper Fidelis." Commonly translated to "always faithful," the motto—adopted in 1883 upon the urging of Colonel Charles McCawley, 8<sup>th</sup> commandant of the Marine Corps—replaced earlier mottos, including "with courage" and "by sea, by land."

The definition of the motto and what it "means" to be a Marine is different for different people, and almost never exactly what one probably thinks from the outside looking in. Now commonly shortened to "Semper Fi" by Marines, the motto and its history bear testament to the essentially arbitrary way in which rules are enforced not only in and by the USMC, but by and in American society, as well. After all, "Semper Fi" means "always fi," in Latin—fi means nothing, it's a nonsensical term. Taken at face value, the reduction of a motto to shorthand underlines the motto's essential mutability. Faithful... to what? Each other, the constitution, the president? Always... since 1883?



Meaning, as every adult understands, is highly contextual. This essential truth underlines most modernist and all post-modernist art and literature. When one takes the changeable truth of life and runs it through a harsh and dogmatic set of ideals, the resulting psychological energy is sufficiently powerful to drive some people to superhuman acts of discipline, in the name of honor and self-respect, and this is very useful when fighting a dedicated enemy. It drives almost everyone else mad, according to the extent to which they failed to live up to those ideals. Some rationalize their misbehavior, building up elaborate personal philosophies to justify their actions. Others descend into pessimism and become jaded.

Teresa Fazio is a proud former Marine, and her war memoir—*Fidelis*—grapples with that mutability at the heart of everyday life, and her own efforts to live up to ideals. It is a top rate book about war, and how serving in the Marines requires great reservoirs of emotional energy under normal circumstances, but especially on deployment to Iraq. It will resonate with anyone who has served in the military. *Fidelis*

may even give military leaders something to think about when it comes to setting and enforcing rules.

The story begins with Fazio's difficult family background—a household broken by infidelity, and an abusive stepfather, the type of situation that breaks many people down and ruins their potential before they have a chance to properly begin their lives. The setting did not break Fazio. Instead, she discovered great reservoirs of personal forbearance that complemented an aptitude for science. She put herself through MIT on a Marine Corps ROTC scholarship. She also learned early to rely on herself to succeed and overcome obstacles in an effort to achieve independence in two worlds dominated by men, first, that of science, then, that of the military.

One of the threads that Fazio follows from her childhood through the military and then afterwards is her complicated relationship with femininity. Growing up, she seems to see in her mother's adultery a kind of moral hazard specific to women, and this feeling is reinforced by the masculine circles in which she moves. It takes time and great effort for Fazio to overcome this inherent bias against her own identity as a woman, both in her own estimation and from others. The parts of her memoir that deal with this question are unsparingly honest.

Once in the military, Fazio proves herself a competent leader whose attention to detail makes her ideally suited to ensuring that communications for a Battalion-sized fort ran smoothly. The war intrudes in the form of dead bodies from outside the wire, and also mortar attacks, one of which nearly ends her life. Nevertheless, Fazio's greatest challenge arrives in the form of a man—a much older, and (not incidentally) married man, who seduces her in Iraq, and with whom she sleeps after the deployment. Far more troubling to Fazio than the embarrassment of having fallen for a manipulative adulterer is her violation of two codes: her personal code, which depended on a lifelong repudiation of using femininity to gain any

advantage (in this case, the attention of a man), and her violation of her expectations of herself as an officer and a Marine.

Above all, *Fidelis* is a memoir of endurance; a story about how a person can bear up under the weight of external and internal expectations. The prose is spare and straightforward, assembled carefully, attentively, and in a way that drives the reader forward sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter all the way to the end. Capable of being experienced in a weekend, or even over the course of a single day, at 215 pages, *Fidelis* is, like Fazio's deployment, intense.

The story is also filled with moments of understated wit, such as when she describes the midnight runs necessitated by a shift schedule that required her to stay awake at night:

*Before midnight, I ran on the rough gravel roads, carrying a flashlight so trucks could spot me. Even with its bouncing beam, I could hardly see five feet ahead, and I tripped over concrete chunks, bruising my knees through OCS-issued sweats. I got up and kept running. Head- lights higher than my head screamed toward me, and I scrambled off-road to avoid them. Trucks roared past, carrying water or sewage to or away from this place; I couldn't tell. I turned around and jogged back for a freezing shower.*

Of a rebound relationship, "if I squinted, it looked like love." Of the internet and cell phones, technology made it easier to talk, but not to connect."

According to Fazio, and the strict rules of the Corps, in helping a married man cheat, Fazio failed to live up to its standards of behavior. But she was surrounded by people who were skirting the system—drinking on deployment, cutting corners, focused on their own happiness and well-being first, before that of the corps. Not, in other words, being *Semper*

*Fidelis.*

This is one of Fazio's greatest accomplishments: she remains essentially optimistic, loyal to the Corps and to her memory of the military. In spite of the failure of various Marines to live up to the ideals of the Corps, in spite of her own inability to reach perfection, Fazio carries out her assigned duties faithfully. Making an error, even one that consumes a substantial portion of one's energy and attention, does not define an individual, and although Fazio's error was apparent to her at the time and since, this aspect of her life does not capture her essence any more than it captures the essence of any human. The experience could easily have ruined her as an officer and a human, embittering her and turning her toward cynicism – but she must have been a competent and caring officer, and earning a PhD at Columbia after leaving the military establishes her bona fides as an intelligent and steadfast worker.

In writing *Fidelis*, Fazio more than makes up for her in retrospect understandable transgressions, by offering aspiring young men and women a realistic and expertly-written account of what it's like to go to war. Her unprepossessing prose, dry humor, and faithful rendition of the trials and temptations faced by deploying women should be read by anyone curious about what it was like to be a woman in the Marine Corps.

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## **New Nonfiction from Teresa Fazio: “Light My Fire”**

*The following excerpt is from Teresa Fazio's [Fidelis: A Memoir](#), reprinted with permission from Potomac Books.*



A week before leaving Iraq, I shuffled through my post-deployment health assessment, a quiz to divine if we were crazy or sick or prone to shooting our loved ones. I gave the pasty Navy doc the answers he wanted: *Yeah, I'm fine. No, I haven't seen anyone killed—lifting that transport case doesn't count. Yes, of course I was exposed to sand. No, no nightmares, not lately. Shit blows up, whatever. No anxiety, just stress. I'm an officer; I can handle it. Let me go.*

I was impatient with anyone who hadn't also been in Iraq for seven months, laying cable like my wire platoon. Our replacements' questions—where did this cable lead, when was chow, was there really a shot-up mural of Saddam Hussein—disrupted my precious workaholic routine, the one for which Marla, another female lieutenant, had nicknamed me Rain Man. With the new troops swelling our numbers, we spent the next several weeks laying as much cable as possible. The Marines bore down, digging what trenches they could with a motorized Ditch Witch, then pickaxing the more sensitive areas bordered by concertina wire. They laid cables straight into sandy trenches, zip-tying them every few feet and burying them under fine grains. Their knees shone white, and they washed grit from their hands and necks before meals. It sucked, but it was celebratory for the Marines leaving country: a last hurrah, the old guys willing to do anything to get out of there, the new guys excited to do anything at all. Even if it meant pulling cable hand over hand, fingers pruning with sweat in canvas gloves. As they tipped blue strands of Ethernet, bits of plastic tumbled to the ground, until everything was wired in. I watched Marla help dig, her slim figure bent at the waist, forearms dirty, red bun over delicate features. Though half the company comprised new troops, I didn't overhear anyone hit on her.

Fortunately, a squared-away comm-school classmate named Torres took over my wire platoon. Major Davis tossed me the keys to our battalion's SUV, so Torres and I could inspect the cable

line. Airfield to the left, headquarters to the right, the rest of Camp Taqaddum a desert plateau. The Euphrates winked below us if we craned our necks just right. Though I hadn't driven in seven months, the potholed roads felt familiar. Torres' clean uniform stood out against dusty upholstery.

I pulled over within sight of some junked Soviet planes, where I'd once gone on a long run with Jack and one of his sergeants.

Torres asked if mortars hit around TQ a lot. I told him that in the past month, most of the danger had stayed outside the wire. Except down that road—I pointed toward the gate where insurgents had crashed a vehicle full of explosives. And, I continued, when the mortars got close to regiment, peppered that empty tent—that was bad. Cut our fiber optics. Fucked up like a football bat. I climbed out of the car and kicked a toe in the sand, unearthing zombie cable. Torres didn't ask any more questions.

A few afternoons later, hopped up on caffeine with nothing to do, I called Jack from the Systems Control hut. He couldn't hang out; he had an angel coming in, he said, a mortar victim from Fallujah. All of the other times I'd been in his room, he'd shooed me away when the calls had come. This time, I asked to watch him work. I wanted to finally witness the cause of his sleepless nights.

"Major Davis would crucify me if I let you see this without him knowing," Jack said. But when I asked the major if I could watch Jack work, he just braced a hand on the two-by-four door frame and said, "Yup."

In his bunker, Jack pressed play on James Taylor's Greatest Hits. It calmed him, he said. Two Marines lay a stretcher on sawhorses and unzipped a body bag: an ashen Navy Seabee with a fresh haircut. Blood sluiced to the sawdusted floor. One Marine held the clipboard; several more circled the body. They

marked the locations of wounds and tattoos, crossing the Seabee's stiff arms over his chest for balance. Jack donned nitrile gloves and pulled a brand-new pack of Camels from the Seabee's pocket. A fist-sized hole bled where a heart had once beaten. *Fire and Rain* kept time.

I shifted from foot to foot as Jack counted dog tags, ID card, wallet, and photographs into a manila envelope. He motioned me back with an outstretched arm and a frown.

The whole process took only fifteen minutes. Soon the chaplain thumbed a cross on the Seabee's brow. The Marines put him in a fresh body bag, strapped it into a flag-draped transport case, and tied it tight with twine.

After, Jack wadded his nitrile gloves into the trash and led me to his room. We shut the door, no matter his Marines cleaning up in the outer bay. He pulled me in, kneading my back; I pressed my nose into his T-shirt and inhaled. Together, we breathed.

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The next night, there were no casualties. I stayed long enough after midnight to hear Jack say my name and "I love it when you touch me" and his son's name and "I love you." He saw the dead when he slept. He thought of them constantly, he said, except when he was with me. We dozed an hour. Then I pressed my lips to his forehead, found my glasses, and slipped away. Six more days left in Iraq.

The next morning, on my walk to stand watch, I ran into Sanchez exiting the chow hall. I teased him about the samurai pads snapped to his flak vest: floppy hip guards, shoulder pads, a flat, triangular groin protector. Each piece sported a different pattern: digital desert, analog woodlands, Desert Storm chocolate chips. He was a Marine Corps fashion nightmare.

When I got to work, I found out the reason for all that gear. A vehicle-borne IED had hit a convoy northwest of Fallujah, killing seven Marines and wounding six. A “mass casualty” event. Jack, Sanchez, and others rode out on a convoy to recover the bodies.

I couldn't sit still, so I walked into the TechCon van. Maybe the sergeants could offer distraction, whether with work, or with *Nip/Tuck*, their latest binge-watching addiction featuring plastic surgeons in compromising relationships. We watched for three hours, until we hit an episode where the plot revolved around infidelity.

I remembered that Jack was on the convoy.



This “other woman” had terminal cancer. Her adulterous lover helped her commit suicide before the cancer took her. The woman penned letters and sipped milk to coat her stomach while swallowing handfuls of pills. As she watched a lakeside sunset and the soundtrack played Elton John's *Rocketman*, I felt a

wash of fear.

Jack was still on a convoy.

While watching the show, I wondered, Will that be my punishment, too? I'd become increasingly anxious about our imminent return to the States. Even more than getting caught, I feared losing what I thought was my only chance at love. Jack's wife in California loomed far larger than any bomb threat. A thick sludge of guilt coated my powdered-egg breakfast. I controlled my breathing.

He was still on a convoy.

After the episode ended, I stumbled out of TechCon into sunlight, blinking back lethargy from hours of TV. I had to do something good, something officer-like: inspect the cable. Check on my troops. I controlled my breathing and swallowed the lump in my throat.

At the far end of the flight line, my Marines were deepening a trench in a spot plagued by heavy truck traffic. I walked the fiber optic lines along the airfield's edge, checking them for bald spots, kinks, and cuts. The air reeked of diesel. Helicopter rotor blades blended into a buttery hum. Sparrows flitted along eight-foot-tall Hesco barriers. After fifty yards or so, I stopped and peered down the flight line. Maybe a hundred yards left. Hot, boring work. I figured I could get to my Marines more quickly on the other side of the barriers, where there was a concrete path. I ducked behind them at the next opportunity.

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WHUMP. Seconds later, a mortar landed on the airfield. I felt the blast wave in my chest and teeth. I took a few steps forward, thinking of my troops digging near the flight line entrance.

WHUMP. Another mortar round, a little farther away. A small rock kicked up by the blast flew over my head, or was it shrapnel? I had the urge to reach for it, to catch it, but I did not. Instead I turned around to head back to our company's headquarters. As my Marines fast-walked past me, carrying ammo cans full of tools, I thought only of counting their heads.

In the following months and years, I would wish I had been on the exposed airfield side of the Hesco barriers when the mortars hit, that I had sprinted full-tilt toward my Marines digging that trench, instead of taking a few steps forward before retreating. I would even wish I'd been hit by shrapnel, like a vigilant lieutenant. Was that the most fitting consequence of what I'd been doing with Jack? If he returned from his convoy to find me lifeless, would caring for my body have made him love me, made him stay?

In any case, he returned. Late that night, I lingered outside Comm Company's compound under a hard pearl moon. A hundred yards away, Jack's Marines unloaded one, two, three, four, five, six, seven body bags from their refrigerated truck. Then they hefted still more.

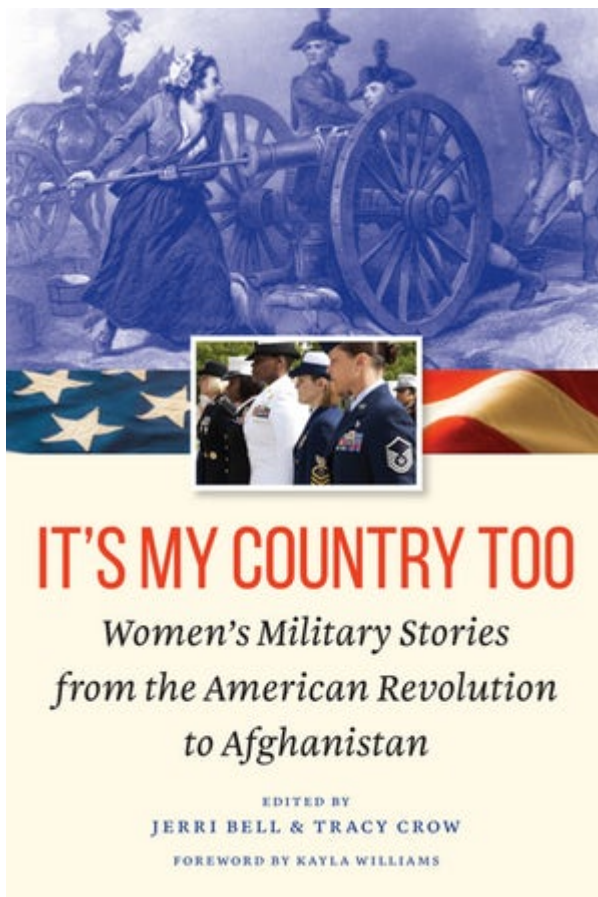
Under the floodlights, I made out Hoss's lanky silhouette, spotted Mullins's round shoulders and rolling gait, almost heard his Southern drawl. Two more darted around the truck, its tailgate the height of their heads, shepherding paperwork. Sanchez stood straight and musclebound, lifting tirelessly. Sergeant Jonas barked orders.

Soon they all moved inside; they must have been grabbing clipboards and unzipping body bags. I stared at the bunker doors, wishing I could enter. If I had tried, Jack would have shouted me away, and Mullins and Jonas would have shaken their heads. I would like to say decorum held me back from going over there. Really, it was shame. The most honorable thing I could do was stay away. Wait to go home.

Fazio, Teresa. *Fidelis: A Memoir* (Potomac Books, September 2020).

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## Book Review by Eric Chandler: IT'S MY COUNTRY, TOO



This happened in the 1980's. Maybe it was after I joined the military or before, when I was thinking about it. In either case, I was sitting in a cabin in New Gloucester, Maine with my Aunt Helen and my cousin, Kim. Somehow, we got into the topic of women in combat. I made some comment that we needed to decide if that's really what we wanted as a country. My

cousin and my aunt both snorted.

I don't remember the exact words, but my Aunt Helen said something like, "Who the hell is 'we'?"

It sticks out in my memory like I got slapped. Even as a self-centered, male teenager, I had to admit they had a point.

I'm still trying to remove myself from the center of the universe and imagine what life is like from someone else's perspective. I read a book during Women's History Month called [\*It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan\*](#) (Potomac Books, 2017). It's filled with stories that address a question my aunt might have asked, "Why should it be so difficult for a woman to serve her country?"

I served alongside women in uniform from 1985 to 2013. In peacetime and in combat. Officers and enlisted. Pilots and ground personnel. Active Duty and Air National Guard. I went to the Air Force Academy not long after women were first admitted there. When I first joined the Air Force, women weren't allowed to fly fighters. I eventually served in units where women were flying in formations with me. I'm married to a retired Air Force veteran and Air Force Academy graduate. Her older sister, also a grad, retired as a major general in the Air Force. I should already have a first-hand appreciation for what strides women have made and the challenges they've faced in military service. But Jerri Bell and Tracy Crow, the editors of this book, gave me a new perspective on where my three decades fit into the larger scheme of things.

It was a new perspective that I needed, for a couple of reasons. For one, my wife had a positive experience in military service. She's tough, but quiet. When I push her on the topic, to find some hidden story of struggle or discrimination or mistreatment, she has almost nothing bad to say. Frankly, she seems like an exception. Secondly, I served



in the US Air Force. My perspective is limited to my branch of service.

In *It's My Country Too*, there are stories about women in all the branches of military service, even disguised as men so they could fight. There's even a story about a woman who served in the US Lighthouse Service. The breadth and depth of the stories the editors included is remarkable. There are uplifting stories and ones that are ugly. Another thing that makes these stories compelling is that they are first-person accounts. There's a lot of background provided by the editors, but the stories come from the women themselves. This is a great accomplishment, because, as it says in the book regarding Korean War nurses (but the sentiment is true for women's stories in general), "None published memoirs."

The editors mention Louisa May Alcott who wrote *Hospital Sketches* about her time as a civil war nurse. She served under a woman at the Union Hotel Hospital named [Hannah Chandler Ropes](#), my relative. Ropes is buried in the town where my parents live in Maine, the same town where my aunt schooled me about what "we" means. Her writings were published in [Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes](#) (The University of Tennessee Press, 1980) edited by John R. Brumgardt. Bell and Crow inspired me to pull this book down off my shelf for another look. I was disappointed to see that my copy, that I read years ago, didn't have a single dog-eared page. Say what you will about desecrating physical books, but mangled pages are how I leave breadcrumbs. I read it again.

Ropes served as a volunteer nurse in that hospital in Georgetown. She showed up there on June 25, 1862, the day that the Battle of the Seven Days started. Her nephew Charles Peleg Chandler died fighting at Glendale during that battle on June 30, 1862, the same week she arrived. In a July letter, she says she's worried about both Charles P. and Charles Lyon Chandler, his cousin. I've been researching Charles P. and Charles L. Discovering that their aunt wrote a letter

wondering whether her nephews were okay was like getting an electric shock. I have Bell and Crow to thank for helping me learn what I should've known already. In a strange convergence, it was Charles P. who inadvertently motivated Ropes to become a nurse when, two years before, he sent her a book about nursing written by Florence Nightingale. Sadly, Ropes and her two nephews would never see the end of the war.

At one point as the head matron of the hospital, Ropes was so horrified at the mistreatment of the enlisted men who were patients, she complained to the head surgeon. Getting nowhere, she went in person directly to the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Once Stanton verified what my relative said was true, he threw both the head steward and the head surgeon into prison. Things improved at the hospital. I was a squadron commander once, so it stings a little to read how she went around the chain of command. But she cared more about the treatment of the patients than how she was perceived. She was also a single mother after being abandoned by her husband in the 1840's. In the 1850's she moved to Kansas as part of the freesoil, anti-slavery movement to help make it a free state, but that's another story. The point is that she was well past being bashful or "proper."

The very last thing that Ropes wrote was a letter to her daughter on Jan 11, 1863 where she let her know that she was ill along with many of the nurses she supervised. She said "Miss Alcott" was "under orders from me not to leave her room." Both of them had typhoid pneumonia. Hannah Ropes died on January 20, 1863 at the age of 54. My son and I ran by her headstone the last time we were in Maine. Louisa May Alcott pulled through and wrote *Little Women*. Funny how lives circle around and intersect in the past and the present.

Two stories struck me in *It's My Country Too* because they seemed universal to me, regardless of the sex of the author. One was the moving piece by Lori Imsdahl. Maybe it was because it dealt with Afghanistan, where I've looked down on scenes

like this from the air and yearned to know what it was like on the ground. Or maybe it was because she talks about luck. Or maybe it was simply because I was transported there by her outstanding writing.

I'm a pilot, so another passage that hit me hard was by Cornelia Fort, who dodged enemy aircraft in her plane as the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor (another incredible story). But this next bit was universal for a pilot, whether you're a man or a woman:

*None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly why I fly but I know why as I've never known anything in my life.*

*I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Haleakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple fields slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.*

When I read this passage by Fort and the story by Imsdahl, I don't feel like a man or a woman. I feel like a human being.

Which reminds me of something Hannah Ropes wrote on December 26, 1862. Her hospital was overflowing with injured soldiers from the Battle of Fredericksburg. The dead and the dying and the amputated limbs. She wrote: "The cause is not of either North or South—it is the cause of, and the special work of the nineteenth century, to take the race up into broader vantage ground and on to broader freedom."

Is she talking about emancipation? She was a vocal abolitionist. Is she talking about the advancement of women? Her writings are clearly feminist. I read all around the quote in that letter and in the book to try to understand what she

meant. The editor Brumgardt infers that she means the whole human race. I hope all of those meanings can be true simultaneously.

*It's My Country Too* brought me to broader vantage ground and helped me face my aunt's question: Who the hell is "we"?

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## **An Interview with Brooke King, author of WAR FLOWER: MY LIFE AFTER IRAQ**

A hand-drawn illustration on a textured, light-colored background. In the center, a skull is depicted with a crossbones symbol on its forehead. A rifle is positioned vertically behind the skull, with its barrel pointing upwards. The skull and rifle are rendered in dark green and black. Below the skull, a large, multi-petaled flower is drawn in shades of yellow, green, and blue. The background features a red wash behind the central elements and some dark, scribbled lines in the upper left corner.

# WARFLOWER

MY LIFE AFTER IRAQ

BROOKE KING

**Andria Williams:** Brooke, thanks so much for taking the time to chat with Wrath-Bearing Tree. We are all excited to feature an excerpt from your debut memoir, [War Flower: My Life After Iraq](#). In a starred review, Kirkus called it “an absolutely compelling war memoir marked by the author’s incredible strength of character and vulnerability.”

**How long was this book in the making? How does it feel to finally have it out in the world?**

**Brooke King:** It is a bit nerve-wracking to have it out in the world, but then I remember that it took me four years to get it there, and even longer to try and write the book. I struggled with what people would think of me and what I have been through in my life, and then it dawned on me. The 19-year-old girl I was then doing all those things is not the same person that I am today, and so I gave myself permission, in a sense, to just let the criticism slide away. Yes, there are going to be people that judge what I did or shame me for falling in love with an officer when I was a married woman, but to me, that girl no longer exists. A mother of three no, I don’t even know who that girl is anymore because I am so far removed from who she was and to me, that is what makes it okay to have this book out in the world for all to read.

**AW:** I have to ask, because my kids (especially my 11-year-old son) are magnetically drawn to the book’s cover: what’s the significance of Boba Fett? Is that your tattoo?

**BK:** So, it’s funny you should ask. The Fett tattoo is mine. It’s located on the inside of my left forearm. I originally got it because I wanted to get a tattoo that symbolized my nickname, “War Flower.” And because I am a writer and symbolism is everything, the meaning behind it is kind of cool, but also very nerdy. Boba Fett is a bounty hunter from the Star Wars lore. And here is where my nerd shows through... He ultimately was a war byproduct of his father Jango Fett who was a general for the Clone Army during the Clone Wars. The

symbolism behind it is that during his hardships of growing up, he turned away from the traditions of the Mandalorians and chose to follow his own path, and so having him blooming out of a flower seemed to be a perfect metaphor for *War Flower*. The design staff over at University Nebraska Press asked for what my interpretation of *War Flower* was and I mentioned that I had it tattooed on me. I sent them over the image of my tattoo along with the meaning behind it and they loved it so much, they decided to use it.

**AW:** I'm a fan of the Fetts, so I think that's pretty cool. (I have even dressed as a Mandalorian, but that's another story.) Anyway, I love your tattoo, and it makes a perfect cover.

So, the book's synopsis begins, "Brooke King has been asked over and over what it's like to be a woman in combat." I found an intriguing hint of an answer to that in the line, "Here is where a girl is made into a woman and then slowly into a man." What does that mean, exactly?

**BK:** It means that there is a time in every female soldier's service where she is forced to grow up. But for me, as a female soldier who saw a lot of things that normally I wouldn't have, I was forced to grow up, but then thrown into a situation that normally is reserved for a male soldier sort of forced me to become emotionally and mentally like a male soldier. In a sense, I was forced into survival mode by adapting to what male soldiers would normally go through in the harsh condition of combat.

**AW:** And yet, even though many women have served in combat over the last decade and more, you share an anecdote about being driven by your grandfather to the local VA upon your return home and encountering not one, but two VA employees who meet your explanation of combat trauma with disbelief and even

hostility: "A man comes in, asks me to follow him to the TBI and spinal injury ward. He points to the men inside the room, tells me to think long and hard about lying about combat before I tell him anything more."

First of all, what an asshole. But also: How is it possible that such a disconnect can exist, not only between female veterans and the civilian public, but even between women vets and the civilian professionals meant to serve them?

BK: I think it stems from the concern that women are supposed to be the bearers of life, so to think that a woman can be hurt in the same way as a man at war, it makes people uneasy. However, I think the disconnect about female veterans comes from lack of knowledge. Civilians just didn't know to what extent women were involved in OIF and OEF, and because of that, they have a hard time believing when a woman comes in for help with combat PTSD or combat related injuries. In order for this stigma or misconception to diminish, the government and female veterans really do need to speak up and account for that missing link of information. I know that personally speaking up has helped thousands of other women because I was one of the first women to go through combat PTSD treatment from OIF. I went through a lot of trial and error for years until I was able to find a regimen that worked for me.

AW: *War Flower* alternates between sections of traditional first-person memoir, and brief chapters of creative nonfiction in which you imagine your way into the minds of other people—a teenage Iraqi girl, a tormented young boy—and even (as in "Dog Tags") inanimate objects. How and when did the structure of the book become clear to you? Did it begin as a more traditional memoir, or did you always know that you wanted it to be more of a kaleidoscopic view of war and homecoming?

BK: I began writing the book several years ago and it wasn't until I ran into a part of the memoir where I couldn't remember all the details correctly enough that I began to



imagine what it would be like to be that person. I am referring to the section "Ghosts" where I imagine what it would be like to be an Iraqi girl on the other side of the war. After I wrote this section, I realized that memories are a jumbled mess of information recollected over time, and someone with combat PTSD has memories that are distorted by their trauma, so when I went back to rethink the structure, I decided that the structure should mimic my memories; fragmented, disjointed, and at times kaleidoscopic.

**AW:** Your wartime experience appears to have given you an empathy with veterans of former wars, and particularly for Vietnam veterans. In the chapter "Legacy," you very sensitively craft a sort of plural voice of Vietnam vets: "I am nothing, they would say. I am the fault of my government, my father. I am plagued with nothing but lies. I did what I was told."

This tone seems matched by one of your early observations about your time in Iraq: "We didn't know the names of the streets or which roads led to nowhere. When shit hit the fan, sometimes we didn't know which direction to fire the bullets...In the end the only thing we knew for certain was that we were all soldiers stuck in the same godforsaken country until the military let us leave or we died, whichever came first."

**Do you think there is a particular understanding between veterans of Vietnam and the GWoT?**

**BK:** I think there is a sort of "oneism" that comes from being a combat veteran. There is a silent understanding that even though your war was somewhere different, you can still share that bond of knowing they went through hell as well. So you adopt with it this perspective of empathy towards other combat

veterans of foreign wars. You know their struggle because you are silently struggle with the same issue. Though by no means was the homecoming I received the same as the Vietnam veterans, but it is that quiet understanding amongst us that to suffer and see war changes you into someone else, that there is a slow coming back process that each veteran must take. Some get there sooner than others and some never find their way back to the person they were before war.

**AW:** You mention reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* while in Iraq. I'd love to hear more about your reading (and listening!) life during your military service—boot camp, wartime—because it seems that this kind of inner world is so linked to a person's state of mind at difficult or transformational moments. (Did you listen to the Grateful Dead in Iraq, for example, or did that just bring back too many memories of your dad?)

**BK:** When I was deployed I listen all sorts of music. On days when I needed to unburden my soul a bit, I would turn on the Grateful Dead and listen to Jerry's guitar in "Stella Blue" crying out to me, allowing me to feel the emotions that I needed in order to get through another day. Other days, I would stare at a blank page in my notebook unable to write a single line. Halfway through my deployment, I stopped reading and writing all together. I stopped listening to the Grateful Dead and listened more to heavy metal like Cradle of Filth and Dark Funeral. Some of soldiers around me listened to Slipknot. Sometimes I went days without anything but the sound of mortar rounds exploding and helicopters flying overhead, soldiers laughing and arguing in the smoke area, and sometimes, I just listened to the wrench I was holding while I laid underneath a truck ratcheting a bolt down. The sounds of war and of home coagulate if you let them, so I made it a point to never let the two intermingle for too long because I become either homesick or pissed off that I was still stuck in Iraq.

**AW:** Metal! Were you a fan before you went to Iraq, or did you

**start listening to it there?**

**BK:** I listened to Pantera and Slayer, and I think I even listened Iron Maiden, but I really didn't listen to it too much before. I was a punk rock kid growing up so I listened more to the Ramones, Rancid, Anti-flag, and Bouncing Souls, that sort of stuff. It wasn't until the guys in the PSD team put on Slipknot and Cradle of Filth that I began to listen to more mainstream metal. And even then, it was only because one day I was smoking a cigarette and I began to really pay attention to the lyrics and was honestly blown away by how poetic Corey Taylor's lyrics were, and it sort of resonated within my soul how I was feeling at the time and gave me some sort of tragically fucked-up sense of peace to know someone else had a dissonance within themselves they were wrestling with, in a way listening to it made it feel as though there weren't two different women inside of me trying to tear my body in half so that they could both be free. I felt that the war for me was a constant struggle between who I wanted to be as a human being and the person I had to be in order to survive, and for me, music sort of helped calm the tearing apart of my soul.

**AW:** Well, I think that's a really powerful explanation of what music does best.

**Is there anything you left out of the book that you wish, in retrospect, that you'd included?**

**BK:** I think every writer wishes they had put something in the book that they forgot, but for me, I struggled with whether or not to include more about my late ex-husband. He passed away right after I signed my contract and though he was happy that the book was getting published, I wish I had incorporated more about our marriage, more about how he was the one to save me in Iraq from not only the war, but from myself. He truly was a wonderful man and I wish I had incorporated more of that in there. The next book, however, does pick up where this one

left off, so maybe there is time to redeem myself.

**AW: I was very sorry to hear of your loss. For what it's worth, I think the book paints him in a positive light—as a mostly helpful, concerned person for whom life was not particularly easy.**

**What were the hardest and most effortless parts of the book to write?**

You always want to say that the easiest parts of the book are the ones where you talk about your family, but for me, the easiest part to write in the book were the wartime sections. Because I had gone through so much therapy and introspective at myself and war, it became very easy to write it down. To me, the hardest part was writing about my family. I really didn't want to write about my upbringing. It wasn't something I wanted to put in the book simply because I couldn't dedicate enough space to the matter that it needed, and so I ended up summarizing those parts and it really pained me to do that in particular because I knew I would be leaving huge sections of my life out that needed to be discussed fully. I also feel bad about it because I shed some of my family members in a very negative light, much to their dismay, and I have gotten flack for it by them, but in my defense, I did tell them that the next book was going to discuss more of family and less of war. It also was extremely hard to dissect my marriage that at the time I was writing the book was in steady decline. How was I supposed to write about falling in love with my husband when I knew he was somewhere else with another woman? But I found another reason as to why to tell that love story; my twin boys, who the book is dedicated to. I wanted them to know who their father was when I met him and even more so now that he has passed, so I wrote everything down as though we were still in love and tried to remember those memories instead.

**AW: In the Sierra Nevada MFA program, you were able to work with writers who were not just talented at their craft but are**

**also combat veterans. What did this mean for you in developing confidence as a writer? Do you think your MFA experience would have been different if it had not included other veteran-writers?**

**BK:** Being in the SNC MFA wasn't just about being surrounded by combat veteran writers, it was about being surrounded by talented writers. I found that I was more so inspired to tell my story from the non-veteran writers than I was the faculty that were veterans. Of course, it helped that I had other vets cheering me on in my journey as a writer, but writers like Patricia Smith reading "Siblings." Gah! It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it now. Colum McCann. Rick Moody. Writers, truly amazing writers inspire and light a fire underneath your ass, and I think the director bringing those writers is what really helped me become the writer I am.

**AW:** I love hearing that. I had a similar feeling when I went into my MFA program, too—that I was finally joining a creative culture that I felt I'd been seeing from the outside for a long time. And we can all use a creative fire lit under our asses, I suspect. What projects are you working on next?

I have started writing my new book, nonfiction of course. It really does pick up where "War Flower" left off, and traces the roots of my childhood while raising my children, the ups and downs of my marriage to James, my struggle with PTSD, and the death of James which damn near almost broke me. To say that this second book is going to be a hard one to write is an understatement, but I think will be almost like an emotional enema, and will really be interesting for readers who are struggling with PTSD, or the loss of a veteran to suicide, or even being a parent struggling to raise your kids. What made "War Flower" so unique was that I was a woman with combat PTSD, but having PTSD while trying to raise kids is a whole other beast that I really didn't tackle full on in "War Flower" so the next book is really going to explore transgenerational trauma and female veteran related issues

that surround combat PTSD.

**AW: Can't wait to read it. Thanks so much for talking with me, an sharing your work with Wrath-Bearing Tree.**

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## **New Nonfiction from Brooke King: "Ghosts" and "The Only Stars I've Seen"**

### **Ghosts**

The young Iraqi girl stared back at me, her face covered over in black; only her eyes shown out from under the cloth. For years the girl I saw in the marketplace haunted me. I used to wonder what she saw. We were almost the same height, and though I had armor and a weapon, she stood there across the street from me staring at me as though she couldn't decide if I was a friend she'd once known long ago when she was child. We did not speak to one another, but I often wondered what I would have said to her, what she would have said to me. She stood beside her mother, who was waiting for water and aid from one of the soldiers who was handing out supplies from an LMTV truck bed. The girl's hands were clasped onto one another, her gaze direct. Her abaya and hijab covered her figure and her hair, only leaving the eyes for me to see. They were restraints from her religion, but they did not seem to bother her. She had lived that way as long as she could remember. She watched her mother carry out the same routine in the morning before she ever left the house: this is how you wrap the hijab around the head to cover the hair, she would say, pin it here underneath the throat and wrap the rest up and over the head. As a girl, she practiced it every day. Now

a young adult, the girl had a hijab that was perfect, wrapped tightly and neatly around her head, the black shielding her from me. Her eyes peered at mine, locked in an understanding that this was her home, her street, the marketplace where her father sold spices, and though I was only there to make sure she received water and medical aid, I felt as though I were an intruder. I smiled at her, and it was then that she looked at my rifle. Two days from now the marketplace will be a pile of trash, rubble, and bodies. She will be dead. Her mother will cry out for her, not knowing in the chaos where she is, and the next time I look at her in the eyes, there will be no life in them. But I did not know that now. Right now, she stared back at me, as if to acknowledge that we were both trapped, that at some point one or both of us will die, and that for a short while we must continue living, if only to come to the understanding that the world consists of people waiting to die.



## The Only Stars I've Seen

The Paladin tanks of First Cavalry, Eight-Second Field Artillery, had been firing shell rounds for an hour, creating a low-lying fog around the base from the barrel smoke of their guns. Their constant firing echoed like thunder and the flash bangs from their turret barrels reflected off the smoke like lightning. The war-generated storm that had engulfed our base reflecting the mirage of a foreign battleground from history's past. Atop the back wall of our base, our brigade colors flew true in the slight wind that had picked up. It had made the battle sounds of firing guns less persistent, as the artillery unit battled not only the wind but the incoming barrage of mortar rounds that were starting to land inside our concrete barrier-lined base.

It had been a few months since my near-death experience with the mortar round, but I still couldn't sleep; the residual pain in my healing shin and the noise outside kept me awake. I'd climbed to the top of my tin-roofed hooch, and as darkness fell I sat there thinking about what every soldier far from any familiarity would think about—home. I thought back to Kyle and the last night I spent in his pickup, his hand trying to find a space on my leg—how he finally settled on my knee, firmly holding it with his sweaty palm. I remembered wishing that he had found a place for his hand closer than my knee. I thought back about what I could've said in the silence of that cab or what I could've done, but I knew only a good fuck and an "I love you" would have made him wait for me. I looked out beyond the concrete walls lined with razor-edged concertina wire and realized how stupid I'd been to leave home and come to this hellhole. All I wanted now was Kyle's loaded "I love you's" and the warmth of his suggestive hand on my knee.

The outgoing fire had ceased. The smoke from the barrels was too thick, making vision nearly impossible. From my perch, sitting in the rusted lawn chair I had acquired earlier from the smart-mouthed medic who lived behind me, I watched as the



smoke slowly rose into the air. I'd been trying to fall asleep when the outgoing fire started, but I now found myself looking up at the night sky, waiting for the outgoing guns to start up again. It was the only sound of war I looked forward to.

Whenever the cannon cockers of Eighty-Second Field Artillery began outgoing fire, it was tradition for Tina and me to watch the outgoing shells. The artillery unit had missions only when the sky was completely clear. Normally it was covered with smog, sandstorms, or clouds. Tina and I missed the clear skies of our homes in California—dark nights full of twinkling stars and crisp, cool night air that could suck the breath out of you if you didn't wear enough layers. Of course it was dangerous to be outside because of the return fire, but we braved it. It was the closest we could get to seeing the night sky, a taste of home. I had gotten the bright idea one night to sit on top of the roof of our hooch while incoming mortar rounds were whistling into the perimeter of the base, but it only took one time for Tina and me to be sent scrambling from incoming mortar fire for her to say that she was never going up there again. But those nights were few in number. Most times I sat for hours by myself on the roof looking up at the stars. When Tina joined me, I'd sit down on the stoop with her, swapping funny stories or talking about our families, and sometimes we just sat without saying anything, just looking up at the clear night sky, listening to the incoming and outgoing fire.

Tonight Tina had been called into company headquarters for the first shift of radio duty, and so I was left alone to watch the night sky by myself. The military field chair I had acquired from outside of First Sergeant Hawk's hooch stood beside me empty, as I sat in the white plastic chair I stole from a Charlie Company medic for mouthing off to me in the showers the night before. The smoke was beginning to lift, but I guess not fast enough for the Eight-Second's gun bunnies because they began to shoot flares up into the night sky,

staining it with red streaks of bright light. The flares' light gave away my position, and Sergeant Lippert, who happened to be passing by, looked up and found me sitting on the roof.

"King," he shouted up, "just what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The sound of his hard voice shouting up to me made me jump. Soldiers were not allowed on their roofs because of safety issues, something Tina and I ignored at least once a week. We had managed thus far not to get caught.

"Hey," I said, clearing my throat, trying to come up with a bullshit explanation that he knew was going to be a lie. "I just wanted to get a look at the action that's going on by the back gate."

He glared at me in disbelief. Normally soldiers didn't intentionally put themselves in harm's way, but that didn't matter much to me anymore. He kept staring up at me. I knew he was contemplating whether or not my excuse for being on the roof warranted his attention. A couple of seconds had gone by before he looked like he'd come to the conclusion that I was up to no good.

He yelled at me and pointed to the ground, "Get the fuck down from there. It's one in the morning. You don't need to see anything but the back of your eyelids."

I leaned forward in my seat and peered down at him. "Not to be a smart-ass or anything," I said, as I gestured down at him, "but you're not exactly slamming back zzz either."

I was still sitting in my seat atop the roof when Sergeant Lippert stomped closer, with a heaviness to his stride like he was putting out a fire with each step. He didn't look pissed off, but his stiff and quick gait suggested he was none too thrilled at my remark. In a few seconds he was next to my

front door and I was stuck on the roof, cornered. For a couple of seconds he disappeared and then reappeared again.

“Hey, King, how the hell did you get up there?”

I leaned out of my chair, cringing as if he was already within arm’s length of me with his hand stretched out trying to snatch me up. “You’re not going kick my ass or anything, are you?”

“No, now tell me how you got up there or I am going to kick your ass.”

For a split second I contemplated whether or not he was bluffing about kicking my ass, but looking down ten feet at him next to my front door, I realized that either way I was fucked. I sighed and said, “All you do is scale the side of the concrete bunker by sticking your feet in the metal rings on the sides. Then when you’re on top of the bunker, swing a leg up onto the roof.”

He started up, his combat boots slipping on the bunker wall. “It’s easy, once you get the hang of it,” I said, as I watched him struggle up the side. He looked like a dog trying to scale a chain-link fence to get to a cat. It took him three tries before he finally got to the bunker roof, and next thing I knew he was sitting next to me in First Sergeant Hawk’s chair.

“This chair looks familiar.”

“Really?” I said, looking away from Sergeant Lippert, who was inspecting the chair. “It’s Specialist Kennedy’s.”

Trying to shift Sergeant Lippert’s attention from the familiarity of the first sergeant’s lounge chair, I quickly changed the subject.

“So,” I said with a nonchalant smile, “what brings you up here?”

“I wanted to see if your bullshit excuse about being able to see the action was true. But from what I can see, you have a pretty good view of the back gate.”

“Yeah, well,” I paused. “That bit about the artillery wasn’t exactly true.”

We both looked at the back wall; the gun bunnies had reloaded the guns and were getting into position inside the turret. The fog from the guns had started to lift and the night sky was visible again—the stars breaking through the haze in patches.

“I thought so,” Sergeant Lippert said, as he shifted his weight in the chair to look at me. “So what the fuck are you really doing up here?”

“Don’t laugh, okay?”

Private, tell me what the fuck’s going on or I’m going drag you down from here,” he said, pointing to the ground, “and smoke the shit out of you.”

“Okay, okay.” I took a deep breath. I knew he wasn’t going to believe me, but telling him the truth was better than doing pushups until I couldn’t feel my arms. “Specialist Kennedy and I come up here when the artillery is going off because it’s the only time you can see the stars at night.” I pointed up to the sky. “That’s what we do up here.”

As I spoke, he looked up, then back at me, and then back at the sky as if to study if I was fucking with him or not. For a minute I watched him, his head tilted back, quietly looking up.

“You know,” he said, his voice dropping a little, “if you sit on the deck of my parents’ house back in Austin, Texas, you can see a whole sea of stars. So many stars, you can’t even begin to count them.” He leaned back in the chair, arching his neck so he could get a better view. “I used to love sitting

out there on summer nights with my kids. I used to point out the constellations. The kids would point at other stars, trying to make them into different things.” He was smiling with his hands on his chest. “Jeanie, my youngest one, she loves horses. She’d swear up and down that Orion’s Belt was really a horse.” He laughed and glanced at me. “You couldn’t tell her anything,” he said, shaking his head, “stubborn, just like you.”

I looked over at him. He didn’t say anything for a minute but sat there quietly squinting up. I could tell he was thinking about the same thing Tina and I thought about when we came up on the roof to look at the stars—home. Though he was probably thinking about more memories of his wife and kids, I was thinking about my dad and where he lived now in Colorado. He always used to tell me about this lake, Turquoise Lake, where he would go camp out underneath the big Colorado sky. I wanted to be there now.

I turned and looked back up at the sky and said, “You know what’s great about the stars?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me,” he said, as a smirk cracked across his face.

“Constellations never move, only the earth does, so no matter where you are in the world, your loved ones are staring at the same sky as you are right now. It’s like looking up at a little piece of home.”

For a while, Sergeant Lippert sat there staring up at the sky. Then he looked at me and nodded before he got up from the rickety chair and started scaling back down to the ground. “You okay?” I asked, as I watched him move down the side of the bunker and then disappear out of sight.

Below me, the gravel shifted and rustled. I stuck my head out over the edge of the roof to make sure he’d made it down all right. After a moment he reappeared below, brushing off some

dirt from his ACU top. He shouted up to me, "King, don't fucking stay up there all night, you hear me?"

I smirked. "You got it, Sarge."

I watched him walk down the aisle of hooches. He'd just disappeared around the last hooch on the corner when I heard Tina call to me. I chuckled at Tina's skinny, gangly legs striding out of sync as she walked toward our hooch, flinging gravel behind her.

I called her name as she got closer to the door. She looked up. I smiled.

"No way in hell."

"C'mon, I got you a chair."

Slinging her M16 over her shoulder and scaling up the side of the bunker, she shouted, "We better not get in trouble for this!" I decided not to tell her about Sergeant Lippert or the fact that I had thrown her under the bus a little bit. As she made her way onto the roof of the bunker and then onto the roof of our hooch, I said, "You'll be fine."

"Where'd the chairs come from?"

Smiling coyly at her, I said, "You really want to know?"

With one eyebrow raised, Tina said, "Ah, something tells me no. I heard over the radio that the outgoing fire is going to start any minute now."

"Did you happen to grab any munchies?"

She plopped down in First Sergeant Hawk's chair, set her m16 next to her, opened both cargo pockets of her ACU pants, and pulled out two bags of Hot Cheetos. She handed me one of the bags.

"Thanks, battle."

"Anytime," Tina said, smiling.

Opening our bags of Cheetos, we leaned back in our chairs. We peered up at the clear night sky as we waited for the outgoing fire to start up again, both content to sit and gaze at the stars all night. Again my mind wandered home. I missed the routine sounds of familiarity, the slamming of the front door, Grandpa yelling, "Don't slam the door!" The low chuckle Nana used to make every time I purposely slammed it so I could hear Grandpa holler at me from wherever he was in the house. I missed Dad's loud music, the crackled sound of the stereo blaring Grateful Dead that echoed in the driveway like an amphitheater. I missed how Dad burst in the door every night, yelling with a crescendo in his greeting, "Hello!" I thought about the last time I'd called home just to hear their voices. I'd only gotten the answering machine, the sound of Nana's voice, "Hello, you've reached the Kings. We're not home right now, but if you leave a name, number, and a brief message, we'll get back to you as soon as possible. Thank you and have a beautiful day."

I closed my eyes, trying to see the faces I knew so well. But the memory was blurred. I clenched my teeth in anger. I needed home right now.

"Do you think it's too late to call the West Coast?"

Underneath her patrol cap, Tina was trying to figure out the time difference as though it were a calculus equation. Using a Cheeto and an invisible chalkboard, Tina leaned out of her chair, counting the hours with her Cheeto, trying to deduce the correct answer. Nodding her head in agreement at her calculations, she turned in her chair and said, "I think it's only five in the afternoon in California."

I lifted up my ACU sleeve and looked at my watch. It was one in the morning. Nana was always my first choice. Counting nine hours back from my time, I realized that it was only four in

the afternoon California time.

“Tina, you suck at counting.”

“What?” she said, raising one hand in the air, a Cheeto caught in between her index finger and thumb.

“It’s four in the afternoon, not five.”

Throwing me a cocky look, Tina’s green eyes stared at me, daring me to challenge her again. “No, Brooke, it’s five.”

“No, it’s not,” I said, shaking my head. “You count back nine hours from our time. It’s one in the morning here, which means it’s four in the afternoon in Cali.”

With a furrowed brow, Tina threw a Cheeto at me. “Whatever.”

It bounced off my forearm and onto the tin roof. “Waster,” I said, leaning over and tossing it into my mouth.

I decided to give a phone call a shot, hoping to reach Nana. It was Thursday, which meant that she’d be home from her stint at Saint Therese’s, where she sat in the chapel every Thursday for an hour to pray. As I pulled out my phone—a red Motorola Razor, the only perk of being stationed so close to the Green Zone in Baghdad—I contemplated what to tell Nana. I couldn’t tell her that I was having a hard time being in Iraq and that I was seeing way more combat than I anticipated. You just didn’t say those things to Nana. She was a gentle and sensitive Old Italian grandma who got what she called “worrying stomachaches.” Ever since she’d had her bleeding ulcer two years back, I had tried not to worry her about my army stuff. She was having a hard enough time with the fact that I’d been deployed.

I dialed my home phone number, hoping that Nana would pick up. I let it ring twice but then closed the top of the cell phone and hung up. It felt wrong to call home, but I needed to hear her voice. Her gentle but frail voice always reassured me that



everything, no matter how bad, was going to be okay. I opened the phone back up and dialed again. I sat waiting, looking up at the stars, thinking of my bedroom back home. For my seventh birthday I had begged my dad to buy me a packet of plastic stars that I could stick on my ceiling. Grandpa had said no, but Dad ignored him and bought them anyway. The night of my birthday my dad woke me up at midnight to give me my gift: the ceiling above my head covered with stars and even a glow-in-the-dark full moon. He had snuck up to my room and put them up while I was sleeping. Of course Grandpa was mad, but by the time I was in high school I had bought enough stars to cover the whole ceiling, so I had the constellations inside my bedroom. I looked up at the night sky and thought of my room with all the twinkling stars plastered to my blue ceiling as I sat there waiting for someone to pick up the phone at home, but it rang four times before going straight to the answering machine. Nana's voice—a resonating crackled sound that echoed through the receiver I held to my ear. Tears welled in the corner of my eyes. From the other end I listened to the background noise of the greeting—the living room TV turned on, the sound of someone shuffling past in the kitchen, the distant sound of Molly, my Alaskan malamute, barking at the back door. As the greeting came to an end, Nana's voice grew louder as she said to have a beautiful day. The usual cadence of silence passed before I was prompted by the answering machine beep to leave my message. In a shaky crackled voice I said, "Hi, Nana. I couldn't sleep and just wanted to hear the sound of a familiar voice. I guess you're still at the church, probably praying for me not to die here. I guess I'll call tomorrow or something. I, ah . . ." I tried to rush the rest of my message before I totally lost it. "I miss you and love you. Talk to you later, bye."



I slapped the phone shut and shoved it back into my pocket. I was a total wreck. I threw my hands over my face and bent forward, resting my head on my knees.

Looking up from her bag of chips, Tina asked, "You okay?" I turned my head toward Tina, wiped my tears onto my uniform, and said, "Ah, no. I think I successfully just left the worst message a granddaughter, who is at war, could've left on the family answering machine."

Leaned back in the chair with her legs crossed, Tina canted her head toward me, raised her eyebrows, and nodded her head in agreement as she said, "Yeah, that was pretty bad."

Chuckling, I wiped snot from the back of my hand onto my black pt shorts and said, "Oh gee, thanks, Tina."

"Eat a Cheeto." Tina handed me the one in her hand. "It'll make you feel better."

Shoving the Cheeto into my mouth, I let the hot flavor of the chip dissolve in my mouth, hoping that it would take away the longing for home that I felt, but it wasn't making my homesickness go away fast enough. I started shoving them in one after another until my mouth felt like I had just shoved ten habaneros inside of it, but I still didn't feel any better. I didn't feel anything but the need for the normality of home.

"Ease up on the Cheetos, Brooke." Tina put a hand on my arm, preventing me from putting another Cheeto in my mouth. "You're throwing those things back like some anorexic chick who hasn't eaten in days."

"Fuck you," I said, spattering half-chewed debris from my full mouth.

Tina just shook her head at me, eased her hand off my arm, pulled another chip from her bag, turned to me, raised one of her Cheetos in the air, and said, "To home."

I leaned over out of my chair, put my arm on her shoulder, raised a Cheeto, and with my mouth still stuffed full, I echoed her toast, "To home."

A loud booming sound rippled through the air like a shock wave. The outgoing fire had begun again, but it didn't bother me. I was thinking of my bedroom, of home.

*"Ghosts" and "The Only Stars I've Seen" have been excerpted from [War Flower: My Life After Iraq](#) by Brooke King (Potomac Books 2019).*

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# Fighting Like a Girl Means Not Being a Pussy: Mary Doyle Interviews Kelly Kennedy

It's never easy to voice suspicions that your boss is out to get you. No matter how you describe it, the accusation sounds crazy. By the time you're ready to put your instincts into words, you've already spent hours, days, weeks making the argument to yourself and telling yourself it's all in your head. It's not until you've fully convinced yourself it's true that you'll talk about it.

Lt. Col (Ret.) Kate Germano wrote a book about it.

Germano had come into her new job as commander of Fourth Battalion with a specific set of goals. She took seriously her role in leading the unit responsible for guiding every female recruit from civilian to Marine as they met the challenges of Marine Corps basic training. The goals she'd set for her command, like boxes on a check sheet, had tick marks from top to bottom, and yet, it took her a long time to realize that, despite her successes, her efforts were being undermined. Eventually, Germano knew without doubt that her aim to prove women Marines could train alongside male Marines was being challenged by Marine Corps leadership. The men working against her started from the very top. But unlike most of us Germano had proof that her bosses wanted to see her fail.

She maps out that proof in her new book, *Fight Like A Girl*, (Prometheus Books, 2018) in a calm, methodical, and well documented way.

Helping her make that argument is her co-author, Kelly Kennedy. Kennedy, an Army veteran and journalist, uses her research skills and a logical progression to map out an argument so convincing the two authors bravely name names. The

names include those of Germano's former boss, Colonel Daniel Haas and even the then, Marine Corps Commandant and now Joint Chiefs Chairman, GEN Joseph Dunford.

In 2010, when the book I co-authored with Shoshana Johnson (*I'm Still Standing*, Touchstone, 2010) was released, I remember feeling such relief that the book was well received and that my work on Shoshana's story had helped make people aware of what she'd gone through. I was anxious to speak to Kelly Kennedy about her work as a co-author on Germano's project and what it meant to be a part of telling this story that was so important, and yet, not her own.

**Mary Doyle:** I understand your agents introduced you and Kate Germano in hopes that you would work together on this project. Why do you think they thought the two of you might be a good fit? Had you ever worked on a co-authored project like this before? And how long did the project take?

**Kelly Kennedy:** Well, at first, I didn't. I had heard bits of Kate's story, and I was a bit worried that the military had it right—that she was abusive. But the more I dug in, and the more I talked with her, the more I felt not only that I trusted her (she backed up her story with plenty of documentation), but that I needed to help her tell it. Because we're both veterans, I was able to ask her some questions based on my own experiences, which sparked at least one chapter. But I was also able to tell her about my experiences as a civilian, which informed part of the story. This was my first time as a co-author. We worked on the project about 1.5 years.



Kate Germano (left) is interviewed by her co-author, Kelly Kennedy, during an event at Politics and Prose at The Wharf, April 10, 2018. Photo by Mary Doyle.

**MD:** Part of the reason I agreed to work with Shoshana Johnson on her book was because I thought her story was, not only compelling, but an important story to tell. Germano's story couldn't be more important in terms of women in the military and proof positive that the decks are stacked against them. Did the importance of this story weigh on you at all? Did the weight impede or inspire?

**KK:** It was tough to hear her tell it, and it was tough for her to tell it. She often calls me her "therapist," which is something we hear a lot as writers. Part of recovering from a traumatic event is the telling of it until the words don't hurt as much, and it develops an overall meaning, rather than just a feeling of pain. But as the #metoo movement hit, and as

we see more and more women prove themselves in infantry training, and even as we talked about women in endurance racing or crossfit or the tech world, we understood how important it was to say this is an issue that effects all of us, and that, as women, we really need to feel like we have each other's backs—that it should no longer feel heroic to say, “You okay? I got you. Here's how to...”

**MD: How did you develop your work method and what did that look like? Was there ever a time when you had to stop and iron out issues? Or were you in sync the whole time? Did you have any influence in how the story was told?**

**KK:** We started by meeting up for interviews. I would type in all of my notes, and come up with more questions, and then we would meet again. Kate speaks in story—she's clear and to-the-point, so that part wasn't terribly difficult. The harder part, I think, was getting the more emotional details out of her. Okay, that hurt, but what did you do? What about it hurt you? Where were you?

Generally, we were oddly in sync. When I sent over the proposal with the first three chapters, I think she was relieved. She has said, in reading the book, that she was terrified, but that she laughed and cried and got angry and loved it. But part of that is because she's so good. The third chapter—the one about her background—didn't quite feel right to me. I liked parts of it, but I didn't like all of it. I sent it to her and said, “I'm not feeling this.” And she added and reorganized and sent back something we both liked a lot. So it was collaborative and fun and so much work.

We had written the story about the investigation as basically a long slog of the things that had been said about Kate. Our editor said, “You know. I think you lose Kate's voice here. This is her story.” So we regrouped on that and focused more on her reaction—that a lot of it was just nonsense, like hugging one person but not hugging someone else, or the

captain who was angry when Kate yelled at her for not doing her job so she walked out of her office. These are not things that are normal in any other version of the military, so we concentrated on that.

And yeah, I set up the outline, and Kate liked it. I would write up a section based on something we had specifically talked about or something generally important, like the background of women in the Marine Corps, and then send it as a word document. She would add or not and send it back. But she saw everything at least twice before we sent it to the publisher.

**MD: One of the most impressive things about the telling of this story is the bravery Kate demonstrates in being open about how personally devastating the entire experience was for her. She often says she could have taken her own life. Did you ever fear that the retelling would have a dangerous impact on her? Shoshana suffered from terrible depression and getting her to read pages always made me feel as if I was forcing her to relive things she didn't want to recall. It made me feel guilty, as if I were forcing her to bleed for others' entertainment.**

**KK:** My whole career has been about traumatic stories—from being an education reporter covering the first kids-with-guns stories to a cops reporter to a war reporter. Fortunately, I was chosen as an Ochberg Fellow after the series came out that led to “They Fought for Each Other,” because not only was I traumatized by the events that inspired it, but I was doing some incredibly intense interviews for the book. One guy talked for eight hours and said he hadn't told any of those stories before. The Dart Center, which sponsors the fellowships, teaches journalists not only how to handle their own trauma, but how not to retraumatize someone. I have to say, I've never had anyone refuse to tell me a story, and I think they trust that I'll listen, and that's huge. We're so often shut down: You've already said that. I can't hear this.



But you're okay now, right? And I trust that the people I interview will be helped in the telling, and that the written story will lead to them being better able to tell it again—to invite people in. I hated seeing Kate cry, but I knew she needed to.



Kate Germano (left) is interviewed by her co-author, Kelly Kennedy, during an event at Politics and Prose at The Wharf, April 10, 2018. Photo by Mary Doyle.

**MD:** When I co-authored Shoshana's book, the "with" co-authored inclusion was negotiated from the beginning. Would you have accepted the job if you hadn't had co-author credit? Kate can obviously write since she has published in the NYT and other places. Did you worry that her ability to write would make life more difficult or less?

**KK:** I had no idea. Kate fought from the beginning to make sure

I got credit—she's huge on that, in general, and she's been amazing about including me in the publicity afterward, which is fun. I think I just had no idea how it would work, but I did wonder what she'd think of those first chapters. I felt good about them, and they felt like her to me, if that makes sense, and it ended up being okay. After working with her for this much time, and seeing her so devastated as she told parts, some of the accusations against her blow me away. The idea that she could be cruel or unstable? Didn't see it, and I was watching.

**MD: Kate makes some very bold statements and charges throughout the book, every one of which she backs up with detailed facts and a logical argument to support them. Did you have influence in how the arguments were presented? Did you know all along that you would need to include the citations and notes at the end? I was surprised at first to see the citations in the text but understand why you used them. It's further proof that her arguments are absolutely sound. Here's just one excerpt among many that is an example of her supporting arguments:**

*We also had women break their hips. Male leadership assumed it was because of a physiological limitation, rather than a combination of a lack of fitness, their poorly fitted packs, and recruits running during the hikes rather than taking short, choppy steps.*

*Just like everything else at boot camp, hikes were part head game, part physical fitness. A lack of mental preparedness could make five miles seem like a marathon. But some of it was due to a lack of attention by the drill instructor staff. The hip-injury rate at Fourth Battalion had me wondering if I was training teenagers or octogenarians.*

*A lot of the problem had to do with how the women wore their packs. They wore their packs too far down, so the hip belts hit the wrong place. So, as they added weight, they hurt*

*themselves. As it turns out, at one time, our athletic trainer had conducted a class with the drill instructors to train them on how to fit the packs for the recruits. But she had given the class to the battalion the year prior, so the new Marines and recruits hadn't gotten the training. Broken hips were the result of a problem that could have been remedied with a simple solution. No one had shown the recruits how to adjust their packs properly.*

*Literally, adding insult to injury, the Marine Corps used that data—the hip injury rate—as justification for why women should be excluded from ground combat jobs.*

**KK:** Sure. She's very well-spoken and thoughtful, so I had much of the argument from the beginning. I did a lot of the research, but she constantly reads and thinks and writes, so she was sending me stuff, too. The fun one was Mona. She told me about Mona, [a section in the book about an alligator] and I kept thinking it over and thinking it over, and then it became this metaphor. So I wrote it up, and held my breath and hit send. And she was right there with me. Because she can be so black-and-white, I think part of my role was to help people understand how empathetic and funny she is, too.

**MD:** Since she was relieved of command, Kate started speaking out in the press about her position that female Marines need to train alongside their male counterparts for a long list of reasons. The way she has been treated since she began speaking out is further support for her arguments. Not only are her charges eye opening, she has never been afraid to name names and to boldly confront the issues. Did you ever caution her about the potential consequences? What is her attitude in terms of what consequences she expects?

**KK:** She understood from the beginning. Much of the time, I was trying to explain that she was going to end up helping people, and that it would all be okay in the end—that someday she

would be glad she was fired. I think she's just now starting to believe me. It's part of her make-up to be brave, so I can't imagine her backing away from anything.

**MD:** I found it interesting that you began most chapters with a letter of support Kate received shortly after she had been relieved. You also included one nastygram but she must have received many more. Some of the comments on *Marine Corps Times* are about what you'd expect. How did you and Kate prepare yourselves for the potential of negative comments once the book came out? You must have been deep into the writing when the *Marine Corps United* story broke. Did that impact the project at all?

**KK:** We talked about Marine Corps United a lot, but not as something to worry about—it was as something to fight. We've surrounded ourselves with tribe. We've worked hard and done our best. We've focused on the importance of what she had to say.

**MD:** There are a couple of places where Kate's husband, Joe Plenzler, adds his take on Kate's situation. Hearing his perspective is a major shift in the story telling but it adds an angle you wouldn't otherwise get since he worked at the pentagon and had direct connection to Marine Corps leadership. In fact, it is in one of Joe's portions that the main nugget of this book is revealed. Was this Kate's idea? Yours? Did you have to negotiate its inclusion at all? What did you hope his point of view would add? Here's an example of Joe's input:

*I served with the Commandant, General Dunford, when he was the Regimental Combat Team Five commander back in 2003, then as his speechwriter in Afghanistan in 2013 for three months, then again for the first five months of his commandancy. He too was no help.*

*It was pretty clear to me that General Dunford wanted to keep women out of the infantry at all costs. He was the only member*

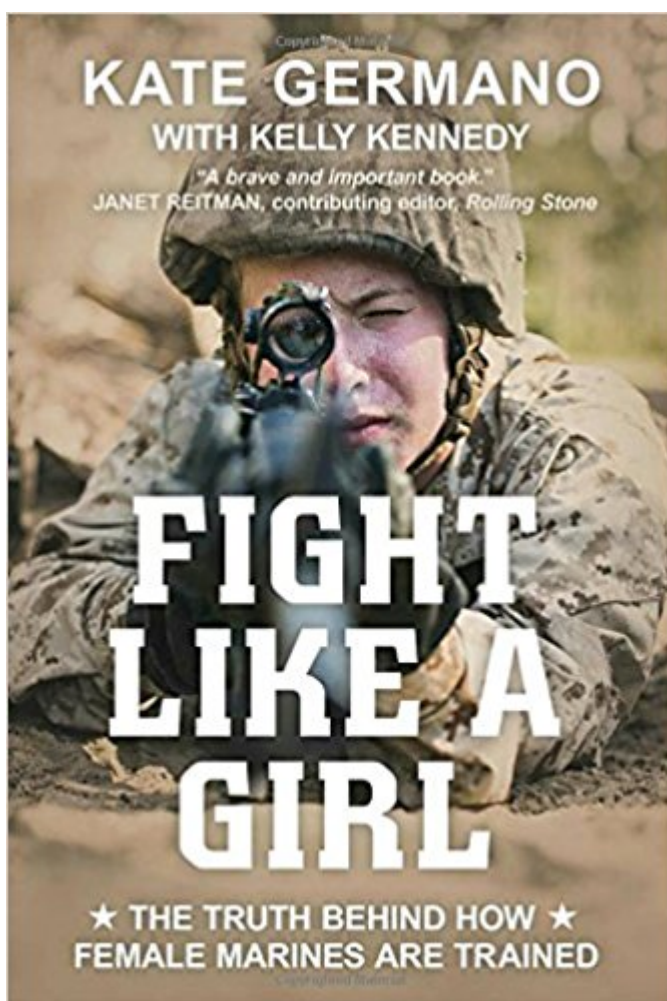
*of the joint chiefs (senior leaders of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and National Guard) to ask the secretary of defense for an exception to policy in September 2015 to keep women out of ground-combat arms jobs and units. That's one way of saying it. The other way is to say that he wanted to perpetuate the Marine Corps' policy of discriminating against women for some jobs based on their sex alone—regardless of whether or not they could meet the standards. His request made a lot of headlines because it placed him in direct opposition to his bosses, the Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus and Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, who were pushing for all jobs to be open to any person, male or female, who could meet the standards. Even more disappointing, when Dunford didn't get his way, he skipped the secretary of defense's press conference on December 3, 2015, announcing the policy change. It's practically a Pentagon tradition for both the secretary and his top general, the chairman of the joint chiefs, to attend together any press conferences announcing major policy changes.*

*In retrospect, it makes sense that the commandant would do nothing to ensure Kate's complaint about systemic gender bias was properly addressed. It's pretty evident that every advancement Kate made with her Marines at Fourth Battalion stripped away justifications for keeping women out of ground-combat arms jobs and eroded claims that women don't shoot as well, don't run as fast, and can't carry the same weight as their male counterparts.*

*With every improvement to female performance, Kate was quashing critical elements of those arguments.*

**KK:** We didn't have to negotiate. I talked with Joe a couple of times to get some back story, and it started making sense to have him there. There would be no book without Joe because he

was at the Pentagon to hear all the background, so it was nice to get him in there as a primary source having heard those conversations. But they're also so different—Kate's type A, obviously, and Joe, while incredibly talented and aggressive, is much, much more laid-back. I think he helps people like Kate, which was important to me—that people see more of her personality. I mean, you kind of go into the book judging her. But I think Joe also helps us better understand how we should (or could) feel about her story, almost like he gives us permission to just be pissed.



**MD:** Kate's story is obviously an important one to tell. How do you feel about the role you played in ensuring that it has been told? Would you do this kind of project again? What advice would you give to others who are trying to tell their story in print?

**KK:** I'd definitely do it again. For whatever reason, I feel

like we were the perfect team for this project—just our joint experiences fell in well together. I loved that we were able to include civilian and enlisted women, and I think some of that was me. My role, I think, was making sure that the Kate piece—the who she is a person piece—didn't get lost in the facts piece.

**MD: Just after Shoshana's book came out, I received emails and phone calls from people who wanted me to help them write their stories. I imagine you are already receiving queries like that. I did end up doing one other co-authored memoir and seriously considered another but that project never came through. What would be your criteria for doing this again? What considerations would go into the decision?**

**KK:** Some of that will be up to my agent, who believes I need to be careful at this point about choosing something that will allow me not to have to work a full-time job while writing a book full-time. I'm so glad I worked with Kate, but it was a labor of love for both of us. But also, I would need to believe in the truth of the story. At one point, Donald Trump's biographer came out and basically said, "I wrote this book for the money, and it's not truthful," and Kate said, "Oh my god. I don't know what I'd do if you felt that way." My response: "I wouldn't. I would never knowingly falsely represent someone." That still stands. That happened a lot as a journalist, too: "I saw the story you wrote today. I want you to write a story about me." You have to have some news judgment. I'm also finishing up a novel, so I don't feel like I'm in a huge hurry to start something new.

**MD: Has Kate had any interaction with Haas or BG Williams or even Dunford, since all of this kicked off? Have they expressed any regret? (I thought Dunford's position was indefensible when he testified on the hill. It's even more ridiculous after reading Kate's book!) Does she ever worry that one of them will show up at a book signing?**

**KK:** She has not. There is no response. It wasn't their story, and honestly, they've already had their say. They released Kate's investigation within 24 hours of her firing in an attempt to spin the media coverage. The investigation is still available online. I don't think she worries about them showing up—and no. No one has offered any regrets.

**MD:** While they may not have come out and said it, it appears the Marines have taken many if not most of Kate's suggestions and put them into practice. One small example is removal of the chairs that formerly were placed behind the women's platoons in case one of them needed to sit down for fear of fainting. Has the Marine Corps leadership acknowledged the role Germano played in making those changes?

**KK:** Nope. But last month, they started pushing stories about how boot camp doesn't need to be integrated because they're doing such a mighty-fine job of integrating it now—and it looks as if they've made some changes. But it's still not integrated at the battalion level.

**MD:** Is there anything you wanted to add that you wished I'd asked?

**KK:** This has been an odd project for me because I've usually stayed so far from a story I'm covering—I'm a journalist. This story was much more intimate, and I'm sure I could have stood back, but so many of the things she writes about have also happened to me or around me, or I've reported on them over the years, and so the story was important to me. In addition, I like her. She's become a dear friend, and I'm proud of her.

**MD:** You have every reason to be proud, of her, and of this project. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Kelly! I think this co-author/big story relationship is so important and not one that is fully understood. I'm hoping your book, along with discussions about how these types of co-authored relationships come together, will help others understand that



there are ways their stories can be preserved even if they can't write them themselves.

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*Fight Like a Girl* (Prometheus Books, April 2018) can be purchased at your local independent bookstore, [online](#), or anywhere books are sold.