

THE SOLDIER'S JOURNAL: A NOVEL

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MASTER'S PROGRAM IN CREATIVE WRITING

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Preface to The Soldier's Journal

Introduction

My thesis, *The Soldier's Journal*, is a military thriller about a female Green Beret, who, on her first deployment to Afghanistan, attempts to resolve her internal issues over the death of her father twelve years earlier. The idea for this work evolved over my thirty-year career as a Ranger and Green Beret in the U.S. Army. My goal when I began the MFA program at UTEP was to create a work of non-fiction based on my experiences in the military and the initial twenty-page sample I submitted for admission was an example of this work. My writing goals for my thesis changed over time due to the military's evolution and to various writing styles I studied during the program.

Over the last three years, I identified four military themes that I wanted to explore: women in special operations and combat professions, the differences in the techniques used to fight the Afghanistan war over time, the effects of war on the families at home, and the bonds formed in combat teams. In exploring these themes, I realized that the best way to tell this story might not be through non-fiction as many of these books lacked the tension to engage the reader and appeared to be more historical than entertaining stories.

I decided to write fiction, but I still wanted to include true events from my own experience. Therefore, I used real events, adding details, inciting incidents, and progressive complications to engage the reader. Through research and interviews, I gathered information about these themes and integrated personal experiences to create a fictional account of the war in Afghanistan with a realistic feel. Most of the events in

the novel could have happened, and in some cases did happen, but not all the events happened to one twelve-man team over a six-month period.

Women in Combat and Special Operations

Women holding combat roles in the military is a very controversial subject. In 2016, Congress passed a law permitting women to perform any job in the Armed Forces, which in turn opened combat and Special Operations positions that include SEALs, Rangers, and Green Berets. Prior to this law, the military only permitted women combat training opportunities such as Sapper and Ranger Schools. Sapper is a Combat Engineer leadership school which began allowing women students in 1999 and has graduated only about seventy women (Michaels) with a less than fifty percent pass rate overall. Ranger School, considered the premier infantry leadership school of the U.S. Army, has allowed women students since April 2015, and only five women have passed (Williams, Chuck), with a less than twenty percent pass rate for women.

Though both courses provide leadership and combat training for soldiers, neither are considered assessments to enter elite units. Having personally passed both the Ranger and the Green Beret unit assessments, as well as having attended the U.S. Ranger School, my personal opinion is that schools and assessments are completely different endeavors. The schools are intended to train soldiers. There are minimum standards to enter, difficult standards for sure, but once those standards are met, there is a reasonable expectation that most students will pass the school and learn the lessons taught (Williams, Chuck). Assessments are traditionally three to four weeks long and are intended to weed out soldiers who cannot meet the high physical, mental,

moral, and psychological standards. After the initial assessment, between ten and eighteen months of further training and assessments must be passed before a candidate is accepted into an elite unit. So far, not one woman has successfully passed an initial assessment for SEALs, Rangers, or Green Berets.

Historically, when opening new professions to women, the military pushes female officers through the training first in order to influence, mentor, and guide enlisted women in these career fields. The first women officers coming into these careers are viewed as figureheads by many soldiers, a way to open the career field and many soldiers assume the standards to pass are lowered to allow the women to pass. This is significant in *The Soldier's Journal*, as it explains why many question Camila's abilities since she is one of the first female Green Berets.

Women make up only 15% of the total personnel in today's Army. They are always outnumbered by males in their workspace, and they must contend with stereotypes and unfair treatment nearly every day of their career. I read three biographies while researching a woman's perspective of serving in the military and conducted personal interviews with three women who had participated in combat operations with elite forces.

Carol Barkalow wrote In the Men's House about the first class at West Point to accept women in 1976. This book discusses the hardships of breaking a 'glass ceiling' in the military, much like Camila does in my novel. The author discussed the attitudes and prejudice from both professors and students at West Point, the challenges faced by the first female Platoon Leader of a combat support air defense unit, and her impressions of the Army's attempt to integrate women into a male dominated work

environment. Barkalow is asked by many people throughout her time in West Point, “Why are you here?” (Barkalow, 47). This a big question for Camila too. Why does she become a Green Beret? Is it enough that she wants to follow in her father’s footsteps? She wants to understand her father, and why he chose the profession, and what it meant to him.

In *I Love My Rifle More Than You*, Kayla Williams describes her experiences during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. She informs the reader that the average soldier (male and female) believe that women aren’t strong enough to carry out missions, that they are emotionally unstable, and that they have no leadership skills. She readily admits that women can have an easier time than men in the Army and that less is expected of them (Williams, Kayla, 5). However, if women take advantage of these situations, they make life harder for other female soldiers as it just reinforces the stereotypes that already exist in the Army. During her year in combat in Iraq, she questions whether she deserved the way she is treated by some of the soldiers and concludes that to be a female soldier is to decide whether you are a “slut” or a “bitch”. If a female soldier hangs with the guys and drinks with them and sleeps with them, she is not respected and is a slut. However, if a female soldier takes the other road, doesn’t hang with the guys and tries to remain aloof and professional, she is not respected and she’s a “bitch”.

Gayle Lemmon’s non-fiction book, *Ashley’s War*, describes the all-female Cultural Support Teams (CST) that were created in 2010. Their recruiting banner read “Become a Part of History” and advertised that women who applied and were selected would serve with the Army’s elite Rangers, Green Berets, SEALs and Delta Force on

operations of great importance (Lemmon, 36). CST teams trained to gather the women and children at mission objectives when the special operations conducted raids, search them to ensure they had no weapons or bombs, and question them about the activities and men who occupied the facility that was attacked. These CST women were considered “the alphas of the Army,” the best of the best of all female soldiers. They knew they were the first of something groundbreaking for women, who were still not allowed in combat positions at the time, and they felt this weight in everything they did.

I used many ideas from these three books to craft my protagonist. Camila is the best of the best, and as such is always under scrutiny. She has experienced sexism in her career, and she is very sensitive to the possibility of sexism being involved in every order she is given. Camila is aware of the “slut” or “bitch” paradigm and has developed methods to fight it in the form of becoming proficient in martial arts and demonstrating her physical fitness to her male peers in order to force them to view her as a soldier and not a woman soldier. She is also very conscious about accepting favors, always fearing the labels that might arise from any misperceived relationship.

War: The More It Changes the More It Remains the Same

War changes over time. The way a war is fought changes with technology and new tactics. There were significant differences in the way the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Vietnam were fought. And there were differences in the way Afghanistan was fought in the first years after 9/11, five years after the war began, and the present.

Between November 2001 - March 2003, the Afghanistan war was a Spartan affair, with very little logistics on the ground to support the soldiers. Additionally, there was lack of

information on the history of Afghanistan, there were very few books on the subject and the internet was not as mature as it is now. Maps of the country were hard to come by and knowledge of the languages spoken there was almost impossible to find. In Bagram, soldiers lived in air conditioned/ heated tents, showered with warm water in trailers, used port-o-potties, and waited in long lines to use the internet or call home. Soldiers located in smaller bases such as Jalalabad had no flush toilets, no hot water, no internet, and no phone connections. Hummers weren't armored and very few soldiers even had personal body armor. Attacks came in the form of ambushes that could be repelled, and IEDs weren't used by the enemy. Victories over the enemy were the norm as every air asset in the U.S. military arsenal was dedicated to the efforts in Afghanistan. The country was primitive: only the top three major cities had land lines for telephones, most water outside the major cities came from wells that villagers drew up by hand, and most cities didn't have electric plants and used generators.

After the Iraqi war began in March of 2003, however, a lot of military assets were shifted to Iraq, even though bases in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2010 became more developed. Lodging and offices were in wooden or concrete buildings that were heated and air conditioned. Coffee shops, Pizza Hut, and Burger King restaurants appeared on the bases. Soldiers were housed in individual rooms instead of large open tents and were able to pay for individual Internet connections. Cell towers were built in Afghanistan and the whole country skipped land lines altogether in favor of cellular phones. IEDs started appearing and became everyday occurrences throughout the country. Individual body armor was issued and armored hummers became more common, though this did not protect the soldiers from the IEDs, only against small arms in ambushes which became less and less frequent. Air assets became

harder to get in support of missions because the war in Iraq took priority. Afghanistan became the 'forgotten war'.

In 2011, the Iraqi war came to an 'end'. For a short time, some assets returned to Afghanistan; however, there was a push to end the war in Afghanistan and depend fully on the Afghanistan military to maintain security and fight their war. Additionally, the 'War on Terror' across the world began to occupy military assets, so Afghanistan was again stripped. However, new vehicles were employed that protected against IEDs. IEDs became less deadly to the U.S. troops, and suicide bombers became the deadliest enemy tactic.

In my novel, I wanted to show the contrasts and similarities that Ryan and Camila experienced serving twelve years apart. Telling the story chronologically, as most non-fiction novels are told, would not give the reader the side by side comparison that I desired. For this reason, I chose my current framework, which involves alternating chapters between the past and present, roughly separated by 12 years. Camila experiences the war for the first time in 2017-2018, about 17 years after 9/11. Ryan relates his experiences from 2006 in his journal which Camila reads, allowing her and the reader to compare the two time periods. Additionally, Ryan was in Afghanistan in 2002-2003, just after 9/11, and the reader has some glimpses of the changes from that time period as well during various flashbacks.

One of the key problems I wanted to show was that no matter how much the military learned over the fifteen years of war in Afghanistan, no matter how many technological advances they had, the enemy always finds methods to kill soldiers and civilians. Even though Ryan is secure inside his compound, he feels obligated to leave with his team in order to make the country safer for other Americans that are patrolling. Even though Camila feels safe in her

new anti-IED trucks, she must leave the trucks to bring the war to the enemy, to rescue hostages, and to capture bad guys. There is always a weak point and the enemy knows it.

Another significant difference in the Afghan war is the participation of multiple generations of the same family. The war has lasted so long that for the first time in the history of the United States you can regularly see fathers and sons fighting in the same war, in the same locations, sometimes together. There even exists incidents of three generations fighting in Afghanistan. A father and daughter situation such as Ryan and Camila is certainly a real possibility in today's army.

PTSD: Effects on the Soldiers and their Families

U.S. War experiences have changed a lot over the years. During 16 years of combat in Vietnam, over 58,000 U.S. soldiers were killed of about 3 million deployed (Urban), and in comparison, during the seventeen years of combat in Afghanistan about 2,400 U.S. soldiers out of about 1.5 million deployed have been killed (Icasualties), and those figures double if Iraq is included. Over 800,000 total were killed in Vietnam, but only 30,000 in Afghanistan (Urban). These statistics suggest that America has successfully improved the survivability of the individual soldier and technology has allowed a significant reduction in non-military damage. What has not changed is the effects of war on the family and the returning soldiers. If anything, modern warfare has made the situation worse because there are more victims of PTSD returning from war than ever before.

The average non-military U.S. citizen thinks that PTSD is always associated with violence and striking out. However, sometimes it's just an adjusting period to what's normal.

And it's a survival tool for the soldier. In combat, the soldier must be turned on and aware of details to protect their comrades and survive themselves. When they return to America, they can't just turn that off. More importantly, do they want to turn off this survival instinct, given the recent terrorist attacks occurring in the U.S.? And what is the happy medium?

The U.S. military recognizes that war affects soldiers and that the reintegration to life at home takes time, patience, and assistance. Before 2002, there was very little assistance offered to the soldiers to help them reintegrate back into their home life. Chaplains were available to discuss family issues or conduct family and marital counseling, but there was very little professional counseling available. This is when the suicide rates, divorces, and domestic abuse began to rise in the military.

The military observed these trends and began to offer more counseling services to returning soldiers. They also developed standard procedures to reintegrate soldiers back into home life that included surveys and classes. Unfortunately, deployments became more frequent and there was little time to fully integrate before the soldiers were deployed again.

I incorporated some of these counseling services into my plot. Because of a violent outburst that was triggered by PTSD, Ryan's counselor requires him to keep a journal before he can deploy back to Afghanistan with his team. Ryan doesn't think there is anything wrong with his actions, even though he seriously injured a man at a gas station on a family vacation. Initially, during the confrontation, Ryan feels confused about how to handle the situation, until he finally reacts as he would to any threat in Afghanistan. Camila (Ryan's daughter) and Maureen (Ryan's wife) are horrified by his actions and don't understand why he would do such a thing. Additionally, this failure to understand Ryan is what eventually leads Camila to pursue a military career, so that she can understand her father's actions.

The Team Mentality

In the Green Berets, the team is everything. In the infantry, the squad is everything. Each unit in the army has its division, but there is unity there, and the closer the unit gets to combat, the tighter that relationship becomes between the team members. A team that has fought together and lost teammates together is closer than family. When a unit goes to war, they are with each other twenty-four hours a day for six, nine, twelve months or longer. During that time, they learn about each other, and sometimes know more about each other than even their families back home. They share stories about their lives that they may never have shared with their wives or children or parents, about old girlfriends/ boyfriends, about the last time they were in war, about their regrets and their accomplishments.

When the team finally returns to America, sometimes their family can't understand this relationship. The wife doesn't understand why her husband refuses to turn off his phone at night in case one of his teammates needs him, or why her kitchen counter becomes a makeshift operating table when a teammate cuts his hand instead of bringing the injured person to the hospital. Sometimes this causes rifts in the family, where wives and children think they mean less than their soldier's teammates.

In my novel, I wanted to explore the team relationship in a Green Beret 'A' team. Ryan died leading a team into combat and his team in 2006 is very close. They joke, they live together, they fight together, they save each other's lives. When Ryan dies, his team takes on the responsibility of looking after his daughter, Camila.

Initially, Camila is blind to the team supporting her. As a child, facing the death of her father, all she can see is her father's preference for his teammates over her. Only Mark, her father's best friend on the team, maintains an open mentor relationship

with her. The rest of the team work in the shadows, orchestrating her acceptance to West Point and looking after her in college to make sure she doesn't fall victim to sexism or harassment. They facilitate her success in the Green Beret Qualification course, giving her difficult missions so that she earns the respect of her fellow students. Camila, however, sees sexism at every turn, not recognizing the assistance of her father's team members for what it is. It isn't until she leads her own team into combat, a team made up of many of her father's old team members, that she begins to understand the team mentality, and understand why her father felt a duty to these men, a duty that was equal to that of his family.

The Military Genre

The military genre is very broad. In preparing to write this novel, I read many biographies by soldiers about Afghanistan and other wars. One thing I found interesting was the evolution of historical and biographical books during the course of the Afghanistan war. When I was deployed the first time to Afghanistan in 2002, there were only three books available about Afghanistan, and these were almost impossible to find or order in book stores. Mostly, these books were handed around the units getting ready to deploy to Afghanistan.

During the first decade of the war, however, more and more biographies and historical books appeared as Afghanistan became more important to U.S. foreign policy. Additionally, as more soldiers deployed to support Operation Enduring Freedom, the population of the U.S. became more interested because it became more common to

know a military member, either as a family or friend, who was participating in the war. Additionally, returning soldiers began to write books about their experiences.

Since my novel is a book of fiction based on many real experiences, I can draw similarities to both the fiction and non-fiction military books.

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, probably one of the best-known war novels, is a collection of interconnected short stories about how the Vietnam War affected American soldiers. Though the stories are fictional, there is an autobiographical feel to the writing. In the story "Spin," O'Brien's protagonist dwells on remembering, how "sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story" (O'Brien, 36). His remarks on joining the past to the future were significant to me and what I wanted to capture in my novel. I have a unique perspective to this War on Terror. I joined the Army in 1987 and saw almost 15 years of how the military worked before 9/11 and I have 15 years of experience after 9/11 to compare. And in those last 15 years, I witnessed the changes in tactics, technology, training, soldiers and, in contrast, I also saw the lack of change, specifically in the results of the war and the enemy's actions.

I've tried to reconcile these experiences by writing both nonfiction and fictionalized real-life stories, but I never felt that short stories allowed me to express the

differences in the eras of the war effectively. My next idea was to imitate O'Brien by writing interconnected short stories that looked at events from different perspectives with reference to characters and time. Though this technique worked better than my other attempts, I still wasn't achieving the comparison I desired. Part of the problem was that the two Armies (before and after 9/11) are so starkly different that the explanations required to orient the reader became overwhelming in details and I had a difficult time not lecturing the reader and bogging the plot down in historical detail. Another problem was the differences in the beginning of the war on terror and the present also created two completely different types of soldiers, while barely changing the enemy at all, and it's hard to capture all of these nuances effectively.

In its current form, my novel has two main characters, Camila (the protagonist) and Ryan (Camila's father), whose service in Afghanistan is separated by about twelve years (Camila deploys in 2017, the Ryan serves between 2005-2006), and the alternating chapters give a good balance of information and action while also allowing the daughter in 2017 to learn from her father who passed away in 2006.

Hemingway's War Novels

Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* are iconic military books about WW1 in Italy and the Spanish Civil War respectively. The most significant difference between Hemingway's novels and *The Soldier's Journal* are that his protagonists are irregular soldiers. Henry is an American volunteer that works as a medic with the Italians and Jordan is an American volunteer that works with the Spanish guerrillas. In contrast, my novel's characters are all American soldiers who volunteered

to join the U.S. Army and serve. I think this is an important point because even though all of the characters are volunteers, ultimately Hemingway's characters always have a choice to stay or go with little future impact to their life. If either protagonist quits and returns to the U.S., there are no legal repercussions. Soldiers in the U.S. Army who quit will suffer from dishonorable discharges, possible jail time, and loss of benefits.

Connected with this is the fact that Hemingway's characters are motivated by a passion for the cause. My characters, normal soldiers, are motivated by survival of the team, of their fellow soldiers and Americans citizens. Most soldiers who go to war now in Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan do not fight because of U.S. political convictions. They go to war because they are ordered, and they fight to ensure everyone on their team comes home.

Military Non-Fiction about Afghanistan

Hammerhead Six by Ronald Fry is a non-fiction novel about green berets waging an unconventional war against the Taliban in Afghanistan in the fall of 2003. There are many similarities between Fry's and my own experience in Afghanistan. My personal experiences as a green beret took place about 100 miles South of Fry's and I left Afghanistan about six months before he arrived in Afghanistan. I found many of his experiences mirrored my own and I could easily see myself creating a non-fiction book that resembled *Hammerhead Six* (my team actually used the same code name which is the title of the book). Fry thinks about war as I do, the battles are a series of problems to overcome through the innovation and training of the unit.

12 Strong by Doug Stanton is a novel about the initial invasion into Afghanistan led by the Green Berets in 2001. This is a very historically accurate book drawn from thousands of interviews, very similar to *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote.

After reading these two books, I felt vindicated in my decision to write my book as a piece of fiction. *Hammerhead Six* has the feel of a history book and I wanted my novel to have more depth and intrigue, like *12 Strong* and *In Cold Blood*. Without the access to the hundreds of interviews Stanton and Capote had, fiction was my best option to create the novel I wanted.

Interior and Exterior Conflicts

The protagonist of *The Soldier's Journal* is Camila Mason, whose father, Ryan Mason, was killed while serving in Afghanistan when she was a child. Despite his many deployments as a Green Beret, Camila enjoyed a very close relationship with her father and felt jealous of her father's relationship with his Army teammates. She viewed her father's team as competition for his love and attention, especially when he insisted on spending time with them after returning from his missions. Just prior to his final deployment, however, Camila witnessed her father commit a violent act that challenged her image of him and caused her to question if she ever really knew him. As a twelve-year-old, it took time for her to process these things, and her father was killed in Afghanistan before she could resolve her feelings. This drives her to follow in her father's footsteps by joining the military to understand her father's thoughts and actions.

In memory of her father, Camila attends West Point and pursues a career as one of the first female Green Berets. Along this journey, her abilities as a female soldier are

constantly questioned by the military system and her male peers who are not prepared to embrace the presence of women in elite units. She is forced to constantly prove that she has earned her position in their ranks. Also, except for the mentoring of her father's best friend Mark, she feels that she must make the journey alone and that all her father's old teammates have let her down, which challenges her belief in her father's team.

Camila's internal conflict is the unresolved issues she has with her father. Though Ryan tried to spend what little time he had at home with his family, he was gone with the team more than he was home. And when he doesn't come home from his last deployment, Camila feels deserted. Additionally, she feels ashamed because she never got a chance to tell him goodbye since she was confused over the event that happened in Orlando.

Throughout the remainder of her childhood and through her military career, she is haunted by her father's shadow, symbolized by a poster that was made of Ryan and is commonly used as a recruiting tool for the Green Berets. Everyone she meets has high respect for her father, but the stories they tell her do not describe the father she knew, much as the Disney event does not make sense to her as something her father would do. She is constantly bombarded with positive feedback about her father and she has pushed the attack at Disney to the back of her mind for most of her life. Just before her first deployment, however, she is given her father's journal, written in the months after the episode at Disney, and she is forced to confront her feelings for him again. During her deployment, then, with a different perspective on life, a soldier's perspective,

she begins to understand that her father was a soldier and that combat teaches survival instincts that can't always be switched off.

Camila reads Ryan's journal and learns lessons that he was never able to teach her in person. Ryan insists that he is writing this journal to explain himself to Camila, because he never had the chance to before. Camila only joins the military to be closer to her father and because of her experiences in the Army, she can finally understand the responsibility of command that her father felt and the closeness of the team. Ironically, had Ryan not died, Camila would probably never have truly understood her father in the way she understands him now. As Ryan states in his journal, only a soldier can truly understand a soldier.

Camila's primary external conflict is the sexism she is exposed to in her military career. She constantly feels pressure to prove herself equal to or better than her male peers. Additionally, she has experienced so much sexism in the military that she has become bitter and almost expects it at every turn of her military life. This is compounded by her resentment towards her father's old team members. After Ryan died, she easily assumed that the team was fake, that they deserted her family in their time of need and failed to support her.

As a result of both these factors, Camila feels she must accomplish everything alone and that she can't trust anyone but Mark. This story becomes a journey for Camila. As the plot progresses, she discovers more about her father, his team, and the war. Also, she understands that the team didn't let her down, but stepped forward to support her in ways she never noticed during her career. One team member applies to be an instructor at West Point to watch over her. Another is her instructor during the

Green Beret course and purposely challenges her leadership skills so that she impresses the other male students and they begin to respect her. Her father's old commander intervenes to make sure she attends West Point.

When Camila is finally given her own team, she realizes the support she has gotten along the way, and the way the team has prepared her for the role to lead a Green Beret team. Finally, she appreciates that there are people she can trust, that have her back, and that she doesn't have to accomplish everything alone.

Conclusion

The Soldier's Journal is a novel about modern warfare. While on the surface it is about the first female Green Beret in Afghanistan in 2018, at its core it is about how warfare affects families. Children are brought up without a father or mother, PTSD stresses family relationships, and deployments make family members into strangers. Camila experiences all of these things and follows her father's footsteps into the military in order to regain a part of the father that she lost. Along the way, she begins to understand the choices that he made that kept him away from his family. This is shown by the relationship she has with her mother as she prepares to deploy, fighting with her about the responsibility she bears, much like the argument her father had with her mother at Disney when she was little. Camila's internal conflict about her confused feelings for her father is resolved in the end when she becomes the leader of her father's team and finally understands the responsibilities he had and the circumstances of his death.

The external conflict of sexism in the military concludes with those in doubt coming to respect Camila as a soldier, but at the same time, Camila learns that not everyone is against her as she originally thought. This is merged with the external conflict of the team unit which ultimately reveals that the team spirit in the Green Berets is strong and that Camila understands how her father's team supported her.

The Soldier's Journal therefore fills two major niches in the military thriller genre. First, with its female protagonist, the novel addresses the new U.S. government policy of allowing women into combat professions, including special operations. While some books have been written from a biographical point of view, I have yet to find a novel that addresses the day to day struggles that women would face in these newly opened combat fields. Second, due to the framework of the novel, *The Soldier's Journal* gives a direct comparison between the Afghanistan war in its initial years and a decade later. This comparison is not seen in the current historical books written about the war because they are usually told in chronological order about a specific period of time. The day to day experiences of Ryan and Camila over a decade apart show a side of the war not normally seen.

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