

## Book Review

***The Fine Art of Camouflage: A Memoir.* Lauren Kay Johnson. Milspeak Books: MilSpeak Foundation. 2023, \$16.88, 270 pp.**

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**L**auren Kay Johnson's memoir, *The Fine Art of Camouflage*, traces her experiences before, during, and after her tour in Afghanistan as a Public Affairs Officer at a joint Forward Operating Base in the Gardez Valley. Johnson is a talented writer who aptly captures the emotional tensions and intellectual complexities of not only her experience, but the experience of war itself, from an unusual point of view.

War memoirs often follow the trajectory of a male veteran reflecting upon the personal experiences of combat, including the trauma associated with it. Traditional war memoirs can alternate between brilliant and mundane, artistically profound and mutely profane. Some have certainly earned their place in the canon of great war literature. Johnson here offers a refreshing new voice in the genre of war memoir.

While both her grandfathers were military veterans, the family military tradition that Johnson follows is matrilineal, and her primary military role model is her mother, who served as an Army nurse in the first Gulf War. Like so many reservists at the time, her mother's deployment orders came as a shock, and she left her husband and three young children behind for a potentially deadly tour in the first days of the war. One of the fascinating threads of Johnson's memoir is her transition from understanding her mother as a military role model to relating to her mother as a fellow veteran coping with the long-term effects of war.

Traditional war memoirs tend to locate trauma in the direct effects of combat. Indeed, James Campbell has labelled this focus on personal battlefield experiences “combat Gnosticism” (203). For Campbell, the personal experience of battle is a defining point of view in war literature, including memoirs, and critics such as Dave Buchanan have noted the methods by which this privileging of direct combat has silenced other voices. With literary silencing, and the assumed “truth” that only direct combat experiences could produce personal trauma, vast numbers of military stories over generations have been ignored, silenced, or rebuffed. These are the stories, poems, and memoirs of what I term the *combat adjacent* experience.

Combat adjacent reflects the tensions between legal definitions of a combatant and the cultural norms that privilege specific groups within the military. In a legal sense, all members of the military are combatants. And yet there are cultural hierarchies that negate the war experiences of military members who are “support troops” rather than the “pointy end of the spear.” These include medical personnel, who fall into a nebulous position of military personnel who are assumed to be some version of non-combatants. When Johnson’s mother huddles in a hospital hallway in Saudi Arabia, gas mask at the ready, preparing for incoming Iraqi chemical weapons, she shares an affinity with the combat medic—performing a non-combat role in a dangerous combat zone. Although most war narratives focus on the fighters whose primary role is to actively fight the war, the combat zone is also full of the “combat adjacent,” the military folks whose primary jobs are not direct combat but who are nevertheless thrust into areas of danger. Yes, the military tells them, you are a nurse, a public affairs officer, a communications technician, a supply truck driver, an NGO coordinator, an intelligence officer, a civil engineer, or a chaplain, but here is your gas mask, your weapons training, your bunker, your mortar drill routine, the weapons you will carry, the tactics you will use to clear a building, your dead friends

and colleagues, and your 'just in case' letter to your loved ones. They may or may not end up in a firefight, but they are expected to be prepared for one.

Like her mother before her, Johnson becomes a combat-adjacent veteran, who carries a pistol and rifle, works in a war zone, and could have easily become one of the many 'non-combatants' killed by IEDs, suicide bombers, mortars, insurgents, or Taliban infiltrators. In Afghanistan, a meeting with the regional Governor requires body armor, a heavily armed convoy, security forces soldiers, pre-briefings related to IEDs, escape routes, and potential booby traps. "Even this simple route to meet government officials in Gardez for what should be a peaceful handshake of a mission," she writes, "could quickly morph into combat." Public Affairs is not considered a combat position among military veterans, any more than medical support, with the effect of marginalizing the voices of the combat-adjacent, negating their trauma, and creating an invisible wound. As a woman in a male-dominated military, serving in a male-dominated combat zone, Johnson herself does not immediately recognize what is happening to her. But the impact on her is profound. Long after her return from Afghanistan, she begins to recognize the real impact of war on her mother as well, as her growing self-awareness develops into a more nuanced appreciation of her mother's experience. Rummaging through an old box of letters her mother had written from *her* war 20 years earlier, Johnson is startled to discover that "She's not the unfazed, infallible hero I saw as a seven-year-old, the vision I took with me to Afghanistan and back home into the aftermath. This woman is frightened and overwhelmed. 'My letters home were pretty upbeat compared to how I was feeling,' Mom admitted recently. But glimpses slipped in."

In retrieving and reconsidering her mother's story, Johnson discovers an unsettling awareness of the way stories work in wartime. Just as the silence around combat adjacent

experiences has altered the history of war literature, so the silences in her own professional work begin to weigh heavily on her. As a Public Affairs officer, Johnson's training places a consistent emphasis on telling the 'truth,' to maintain public trust in the military. However, her training also emphasizes a bland, soothing, 'nothing to see here' style of communication that, while not necessarily untrue, actively works to smooth over problematic facts, bad judgment, poor decisions, real-world complexities, and emotional authenticity. Before her deployment to Iraq, Johnson did not question the role of her story-telling—she was a truth-teller, she was committed to the mission, and she was making a positive difference in the world. But over the course of her deployment, her perspective shifts: "I never completely bought into the idea that public affairs dealt strictly in facts. Every sound bite, base tour, presentation, and newspaper article, no matter how benign, aimed to elicit a particular response. . . . Now, though, the claims were starting to feel exaggerated, the efforts sleazy."

In Afghanistan, her job title shifts to Information Operations. Now she is not deflecting or calming—she is actively targeting. As she writes, "I was learning to see information not just as a communications tool, but as a weapon." She is combat adjacent, but actively shaping the perceptions of the war, both with her own superiors and the local population. And she gradually comes to realize how problematic this is, as she is 'spinning' combat, peace, politics, and local realities to maintain the illusion of a successful war effort. In her memoir, Johnson explores her growing awareness of both complicity and resistance, guilt and good intentions. Her pistol and rifle remain unused, while she deploys her real weapon: language itself. When the US Ambassador to Afghanistan is scheduled for a visit (though he cancels at the last minute), she dives into the preparations while a colleague scribbles "Operation Potempkin Village" on a

whiteboard. "At the time," she writes, "I didn't question our strategy—to turn our information weapons on our own government leadership."

Language has long been key to warfare, playing a starring role in discovering or obscuring the truth about a war, both to the participants themselves and to those back home or up the military chain of command. Johnson *wants* to believe in the cause, *wants* to be making the world—and Afghanistan—better. She does not approach the war from a position of cynicism so much as disappointment. But she discovers the banal platitudes of Public Affairs and the focused good-news stories of Information Operations are more than inadequate—they are possibly undermining the entire enterprise, as they are creating a false reality of progress and nation building. In fact, the war itself is a multi-layered hodgepodge of miscommunication, bureaucratic confusion, inconsistent goals, unlikely partnerships, endemic corruption, and the disarray of civil war, where at least one side (and sometimes all sides) engage in terror and torture. The war is fought as a series of local wars, with a rotating cast who may or may not know what happened the month before. "We were all familiar with the saying that Afghanistan wasn't a nine-year war; it was nine one-year wars. We fought fresh campaigns every year with the rotation of units and the influx of new leadership bringing different philosophies and priorities." The US mission was a jumble of projects led by the Defense Department, the State Department, and a variety of non-governmental organizations and aid societies. Afghanistan was a complex vortex of the outer-facing government, the parallel shadow government engaged in bribes and corruption, a male-centric culture that erased or marginalized women, tribal dynamics, Taliban terrorism and murder, and a lack of basic services that made efforts at modernizing national infrastructures all but impossible.

Just one example of the complexities appears in attempts to build schools, hospitals, and other civic centers. “We were learning the tangled web that tied all operational elements together and that kept us from reaching the heart of the issues. Subcontractors at PRT construction sites cut corners in order to save money to pay bribes to contractors. Contractors paid bribes to insurgents to ensure security. Insurgents took orders from Afghan government officials, who hid behind a barricade of red tape. Projects were left unfinished or were built so poorly that walls could literally be picked apart with a fingernail. The general population saw little progress and many broken promises. More mess to clean up. More information Band-Aids.” Tragically, given later events, the only group of people in Johnson’s memoir who are truly inspiring, and who are truly embracing democratic reforms, education, and civic progress are the Afghan women.

Eventually, Johnson begins to wonder if her job is more deceptive than illuminating to the military leadership and decision-makers. “Besides daily interactions, which were colored by politics and fear, we had no way of knowing if perceptions had changed since the beginning of our deployment—or since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom. We tallied Measures of Performance—numbers of schools built, millions of dollars spent, frequency of insurgent attacks—but not Measures of Effectiveness.” Where is the line between making the best of the situation and propaganda? What is the distinction between leaving out unsavory details and lying? “I sprinkled small truths around. No one knew the whole story. I was protecting everyone, I reasoned, the same way my parents protected us kids when Mom deployed, keeping fear between the two of them.” She writes an op-ed on the Afghan elections that is challenged by Thomas Ruttig, who was in-country reporting on the violence that she downplayed. “I am sorry,” he writes of her report, “but this is plain propaganda.” Months later, reading his response after

she has returned to Florida, Johnson agrees. A significant turning point is the execution-style murder of three women and two men, initially reported as an Afghan honor killing. The women were bound, and one of them was pregnant. Johnson and her colleagues are horrified by the bloody images. A later investigation reveals the perpetrators to be American Special Forces, engaged in a "raid" that no one can justify. When the Afghans demanded reparations for the women's deaths, Johnson "discovered a new kind of anger for the fact that Afghan women really were worth more dead than alive. A new kind of fear stalked me too. Maybe I was not only not changing the world for the better; maybe I was actually making it worse. . . . *My job isn't life or death*, I'd always told myself. But what if it was?"

Years after Johnson's deployment, when the Afghan government collapsed so suddenly and the Taliban took control once more, military officers were widely shocked by the immediate dissolution of everything they thought they had built in Afghanistan. But enlisted personnel—the non-commissioned officers who had served alongside them—were not. Perhaps Johnson represents the link between the two—the combat-adjacent memoir, the non-traditional point of view that combines the best intentions with the awareness of failure.

As a memoir of war, Johnson has written a powerful narrative of growing self-awareness and growing doubt. The patriotic young college student develops first into a combat-zone officer and then a thoughtful and contemplative veteran, one who recognizes the power of language and stories to affect the world on multiple levels. Her memoir asks important questions about the obligations storytellers owe both themselves and their readers. War stories create realities, for better or worse, whether combat, combat-adjacent, or as entertainment in films or popular fiction. In her memoir, Johnson abandons the professional blandness of Public Affairs and finds her own voice. Her memoir differs from others in its perspective, in her attempt

to give everyone the benefit of the doubt as long as possible, in her natural inclination to believe the best about people. This is not a memoir, for instance, in the style of Katherine Schifani's *Cartography: Navigating A Year in Iraq*. But it is a well-crafted, thoughtful reflection on war and its broader effects on a single person and those around her, whether personal or professional, in near proximity or remotely located, in the present, past, or future.

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