KATHLEEN HARRINGTON

No Man's War
An interview with Angela Ricketts

Although I've served in the military for over 30 years, it's only now, with Angela Ricketts' memoir, that I feel what it's like to be *married to a solider*. In *No Man's War,* this self-proclaimed "Army *wife*" (not spouse) and mother of three, reflects on what it means to keep the mission on the home front alive during her husband's multiple, long-term deployments. In compelling, fresh, clear rhetoric she speaks to what traditionally is not spoken about—just endured. From marriage to isolation, from social circles to sexual attack, and from "casualty stress" to "toxic leadership" the scenes are invitingly raw.

Military families will connect quickly to the chaos that comes with multiple moves; and, they will acknowledge such chaos is often primarily borne by one partner who has to be attuned to an "inventory of curtains to see which would fit [a particular] house." Military families will recognize marriages on "autopilot" and strained conversations about how going "camping" or attending "coveted war college will be great for [the] family." They will also appreciate accurate depictions of a regimented, if not stoic, military culture whose members must "maintain at least an outward appearance of strength, control, and resilience; the ugly, snotty breakdowns are for behind closed doors."

Ricketts kicks down the closed doors. She exposes the hazardous terrain an Army wife must navigate—from the "*perfumed-turds"* (her pet name for senior officers' wives) to those who are more supportive, "battle-buddies." A wife's role morphs along a well-defined continuum of experience which, ironically, is in-step with the career trajectories and social mores of these wives' military husbands.

There is tolerance of the most junior ranking wives who don't get "the nuances" and "army wife finesse that has taken the rest of [them] two decades to perfect." There is a pecking order among wives of commanders. There is a protocol between wives of deployed men and wives of non-deployed men. After all, "all deployments are not created equal." And just when it seems as if she's reached the threshold of exposing petty antics, Ricketts pivots only to recall with fondness "the bond between battle buddies [which] can never be underestimated or forgotten, no matter how much time elapses. There is an unavoidable intimacy in the challenges [they] faced together."

Unavoidable intimacy insulated with sheer grit: "even the wives of the 101st emit badassery." One of her characters, Elizabeth, describes Army wives as "buoyant." Stay afloat. Stay connected. Stay sane. And if they survive, if they rebound with marriages and self-awareness in-tact, there certainly is still no happy ending. Ricketts is haunted by lives lost, by Roselle Hoffmaster's (a woman soldier's) suicide, and, ultimately, by the price of war extolled on her and her family.

Her voice calls attention to the familial bystander, the partner who didn't quite sign-up for this military gig. She acknowledges that years of "war faces firmly locked in place" take their toll but the experience also spawns a "vivid appreciation for each other and what [the Army wives] overcame." Others feel it too. Perhaps none more than outgoing Army Chief of Staff General Ray Odierno who retired in August 2015 after 39 years of service by thanking all military spouses. He says of his wife Linda, "she sacrificed her entire life for me," and he goes on to honor her duty—attending "over 500 memorial services." Let's pause there so it sinks in—over 500. *No Man's War* is a standing ovation to General Odierno's speech; it's a testimony to remembering the thing that [the Army wives] thought had broken [them], but just bent [them] instead."

Angela Ricketts

no man's war



Irreverent Confessions of an Infantry Wife

"War, she came to realize, is not waged by combat soldiers alone but by women whose marriages and families are disrupted, who raise children as virtual single parents, and who hide overwhelming fears and anxiety as they live with 'another new normal' that comes with every new mission. Outspoken in her critique of the 'Army machine,' Ricketts celebrates the 'secret sisterhood' of soldiers' wives, defiantly and desperately battling for survival. A blunt, bold debut memoir."

—*Kirkus*

"*Sometimes, not often, but sometimes I think about the overall scope of the war.* Surprisingly, no one in our circle ever talks about the war as a whole. Only that we are doing great things over there and should be filled with pride. We are filled with pride, but I wonder if secretly we all wonder what the point is. If it's worth it. We fight a losing war but that little nugget of truth never works its way into the conversations of our inner circle of warriors and their wives. Somehow whether or not the war is winnable or not is beyond our scope, an irrelevant detail. We don't do it to win anymore; we do it because it's what we know how to do. Get ready to go. Get ready to come back. And the moments in between we mark on the calendar. *It's our battle rhythm.*"

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KH: *Your book is autobiographical, and yet in it your husband is called Jack while in the Acknowledgements he is Darrin. This raises the question of how much you changed and for what reasons. Did you alter some stories or combine parts of several into one? Did you feel the need to protect anyone? Did you leave stories or parts thereof out which you now wish you had included?*

AR: This first question has many pieces but shares the common theme of truth. As a lifelong journaler I had an overwhelming plethora of material to draw from. Several events, for example, my friend losing her temper with her child; my attack and subsequent failure to report because my husband was deployed; I desperately tried to write around but couldn't omit in the end. You can't have beauty without ugly. Sure, there are other things I left out altogether and yes, to protect people. I intentionally didn't write much about my children because it felt unfair and exploitive. To respect and protect relationships with certain people represented in *No Man's War*, I afforded them an opportunity to read and revise sections pertaining to them. From that, I omitted a few things by request. There are two truth-bends in the book. The first involves the Ben character and my bowling ball caper and the second is the dog poop and my neighbor's neglected blanket. Smearing the blanket in a pile of dog excrement painted a visceral image of my overwhelming rage and feeling of helplessness, and the irrational ways those feelings were manifested.

Nearly all of the names in the book have been changed except for a few mentioned in the acknowledgments. Using real names would have been vindictive but the stories themselves deserved to be told without the blatancy of using real names. The people behind the characters recognize themselves, at least those who have picked up the book at all. Only the dramatic and attention-seeking neighbor who had 911 on speed dial has publicly outed herself, which ironically cemented the characteristics my words portrayed. Anyone with Google and several hours to kill can figure out the identity of most characters.

The true identity of Roselle Hoffmaster was important to use because it gave her untold and tragic story a level of justice. Her widower felt that a broken and self-protecting circle of toxic leadership contributed to brushing her story and suicide under the rug. Vindication in seeing her story acknowledged afforded her widower a tiny measure of peace. He is a lovely man and getting to know him and Roselle through my research and conversations with him was a blessing. No one in our brigade had ever reached out to him in the seven years between her death and when I contacted him. I was ashamed of that.

As for my husband, that's a funny story. In the first printing of the book, the jacket still refers to him as Darrin because I changed his name in the 11th hour before print and the jacket is the one detail that slipped by the name change. During the six months or so of writing the manuscript, my husband never read a single word. I had many beta readers but he was not one of those. On a few random occasions he stood in the kitchen washing dishes and asked, "Are you going to write about…?" I always replied, "Do you mind?" His response with a grimace followed by a chuckle. Those moments symbolize how deeply supportive he was and firm in his belief that what I wrote was my story, not his. During the final revisions, our daughter was simultaneously recuperating from kidney reconstruction at Children's Hospital in Denver. Suddenly it dawned on me that Darrin had two days to review the manuscript prior to galley print. I had a draft copy printed at FedEx, and my husband stayed up two nights reading. I was a nervous wreck. He was the one person whose reaction I couldn't predict and fretted over because the book reads like a diary. Part of me expected an angry protest and for him to shred it with a red pen. But he didn't. Sure, there were parts of the book he disagreed with but he loved it. His overall response was that he wished I had been more open with him during our worst moments as a couple. We both spent so much energy and time trying to protect each other at the expense of our marriage. Anyway, aside from a few technical or possibly classified details, he only asked me to change his name. In the summer of 2014, time of release, he was still active duty and thus slightly uneasy about career repercussions. I wasn't convinced how much a name change inoculated him from that, but I honored his request. I said to him, "Well. What do you want your name to be? I've already used the cool ones." Without missing a beat he answered, "Jack." Jack is the name of our only son and eldest child. Without time to think it though, it seemed perfect.

KH: *The book more or less proceeds chronologically, but is told retrospectively. While writing it, how much did you think about memory, about its truth or possible unreliability, or about memory's transformative power? Are there places in your memoir where you are particularly aware of memory's reach beyond a perfectly mimetic recording?*

AR: Once again, I relied heavily on journals for basic facts and my state of mind. How I interpreted those facts is where the genre of memoir for the author gets tricky. Individuals portrayed in *No Man's War* and others who experienced that time period along with me have remarked on my memory for detail. Most of those

details are in fact from my memory. While creating my framework for the story, I reached out to friends and acquaintances to compare stories and make sure I wasn't totally out in left field. Anyone is free to write a book and tell her version but this was mine. I've been called a mean girl, bitch, and many other derogatory things—but no one has called me a liar.

Certain memories are a part of me like my arms are part of my body. The chapter where I hugged soldiers as they got on the bus for fifteen months in Iraq is one of those memories. The realization that those soldiers would not all return hit me in the moment, and I will never forget that pit in my stomach. I kept thinking of my own 11-year-old (at the time) son and the Ranger t-shirt he'd worn into a holey rag. These young soldiers had been that boy just a few years before. I wanted to block the doorway of the bus with my body and scream. But I could only hug, tell them to be safe, and watch them leave.

Regarding the chronology, I began each chapter with a date but the timeframe of individual chapters skips around. A few readers found that structure disorienting. AHA! That's what I wanted. I wanted the readers to feel that sense of disorientation that I felt. While I lived through the stories that became the book, I never knew what was coming next and had to learn to adapt and accept that constant feeling of spinning. My editor did an excellent job of keeping me from making the non-linear structure even more chaotic! I wanted the evolution of the story to be my primary concern, not whether or not it was chronological.

KH: *You are quite critical, even dismissive, of most people in the book, and you include yourself and Jack among your targets. From what perspective does the criticism flow?*

AR: I re-read *No Man's War* every few months to refresh my memory. Each time I cringe and wonder who that angry woman was. Overwhelming rage and no place to direct it except by writing. It was my catharsis. I own up to my flawed and sometimes judgmental nature in the book, and justified that by throwing myself under the bus as much or more than other characters than it was fair. I wasn't a saint and do not paint myself to be the only rational character. This book was written from my gut, not from my heart. Part of my anger was fueled by how fed up I was by the media's only-happy-and-oh-so-resilient portrayal of military families.

Whatever the deeper implications about me are, negative interactions tend to stick in my mind more clearly (possibly because the qualities that I detest the most in others lurk somewhere hidden in my own personality so it becomes as much about self-loathing). Positive interactions make for smooth sailing but not often

the most engaging characters in a novel or memoir. Each of my less than stellar characters added value and had a sympathetic side. Readers who missed that nuance did not read deeply enough.

For example, some folks perceived my Linda Stewart character (the sage and entrenched general's wife) as negative, which is a compelling view. Had I written about her as a man, there would have been nothing but respect. She was tough, hard-working, and precise. Because of those qualities families were steadfast and felt safe. The harshest critics of my book who have used words like bitch and mean girl to describe me need to step back and check their sexism, as they are the same ones who saw Linda as a negative character when she was actually a strong and effective leader.

The people in my life who became characters represented archetypes and were not necessarily a reflection of the overall role they played in my life. I wanted characters that would make readers think, "Hey! I know her! That could be my neighbor she's writing about!"

KH: *In my reading of* No Man's War *Ben is the one (of two) very positive characters; the other is Elizabeth. What exempts Ben from your criticism? In fact, it could be argued that your relationship with him is very much like a successful, three-dimensional marriage, one that is better than your actual one. How would you respond to this? Did you intend any such fore shadowing? Doesn't it make sense that other wives might have concluded that you and Ben were "canoodling"? If the army is Jack's mistress, as you say often, aren't you Ben's in a parallel, platonic way?*

AR: I've wondered why no one else asked this. Ben only wanted to go back to combat with his soldiers but he devoted himself to his position as our rear detachment commander. I am grateful for his dedication and the way he took care of our flock at such a perilous time. But there was tension for sure. This points to the delicate balance of power and personality within that triadic relationship between commander, commander's spouse, and rear detachment. At various times, each of us felt caught in the crossfire between the other two. That's the part of our culture that the civilian world can't quite comprehend—the lack of clear line between personal and professional during wartime. But how does that automatically lead to an assumption of a romantic relationship? Again that points to another facet of our culture of competitiveness and vicious gossip. Who even uses the word canoodle? To me, that was the funniest thing of all! Ben and my husband share a tremendously high code of ethics and morality and yes, my own marriage then was a wreck. I

think that if my husband had not previously served in a rear detachment position, then he wouldn't have been as understanding and accepting of the intricacy of that relationship. He had his own tight bond with my Kate O'Malley character, and she remains a great friend to this day, as does Ben.

KH: *You have now written a book and seen it into publication and a positive response from readers. How has doing all that changed you, given you an identity apart from Army Wife, or allowed for a different kind of marriage? Do the characterizations of the "perfumed turds" (wives) also target traditional marriages? Hovering in the background but explicitly acknowledged is the Catholic Church, with its specific views on women, reproduction, and that idea of traditional marriage. Are you in any way being critical of the Church?*

AR: Army Wife is an identity and to take that one step further, many make the choice to not pursue individual careers and instead become career army wives. What other career in the world requires that level of partnership from a marriage? None. We are it. While there is an element of resentment that can eventually grow from that, there's also a lot of comfort and freedom in knowing exactly what is expected and where you fit.

My husband retired a few months ago and I'm struggling to find where I fit now. No Man's War has entrenched me further into a culture and identity that my husband has ironically put in his past. For that reason and others, I would like for my next writing endeavor to have nothing to do with military life.

As for the Catholic Church, I am a cafeteria Catholic and to devout Catholics that makes me no Catholic at all. But, faith is one thing I keep private because it is so precious to me. I hold dearly to the idea of a traditional family. Divorce just doesn't happen in my family. Not an option and I'm grateful for that. Marriage is family and family doesn't leave. I feel the same about my army family—even those army sisters that I supposedly whipped under the bus in my book. My ultimate point was that regardless of the stabs and no matter how much misdirected rage we shot at each other, no one understands us like we understand us. Nothing can replace that bond.

KH: E*ven as you are very proficient at rhetoric in your writing, you also see through the empty rhetoric with which officers and clergy send men off to war or bring them back, whether dead or alive. Are you against all rhetoric, preferring instead stripped down prose, or rhetoric where the feelings do not match the occasion? If, as I suspect,*

you choose the latter, do you think in retrospect there are places in your own writing where the rhetoric is empty? Are there characters in the book who speak authentically?

AR: Rhetoric is like a Life-proof phone case. It's the protective shell of our humanity. I think we use rhetoric when there are literally no other words, or the real words are too bitter to utter. It's a way of "not looking in that direction." It's a way of dealing peripherally with things too intense for full eye contact.

Rhetoric is what I call the KoolAid. It's a blind belief. I suppose that same overall theme could also be applied to my feelings about the church. I find comfort and belonging in rhetoric but do I fully buy into it? We need to believe in it and cling for survival. It's only in later reflection that we can finally question aspects of rhetoric.

The Colonel O'Malley character from my book is now the 39th Chief of Staff of the Army, General Mark Milley. Last month I had the privilege of attending his swearing in ceremony and the retirement ceremony of General Odierno. General Milley gave a strong and impassioned speech with zero empty rhetoric. He spoke truth. He didn't just look at the audience and say "Army Strong!" He explained the true meaning behind that concept. He spelled out the expensive cost of war and what it means to be a soldier in an adapting and changing army.

KH: *One thing some of the wives in your book lack is an awareness of nuances, and I think one implicit message of the book is that if they had that awareness, they could manage better. But that would mean most of them would possess your cynicism, your opposition to authority, your independent streak. Then what? And what if the men were aware of nuances, had come to know that "Dulce et Decorum Est" is what sells war? How would that change how they go to war?*

AR: Some people are hardwired to question rules and others are hardwired to naturally follow rules. Thinking collectively wasn't necessarily my nature but I knew myself well enough to set my own opinions aside. My husband is my polar opposite and wouldn't dream of questioning a rule. We're a good fit and nice balance that way. Someone on Amazon recently called me a narcissistic megalomaniac (yes, that is redundant). I wonder where she got that idea but I assume from my natural opposition to authority. If anything, I envy the sunny disposition and innocence of the Audrey-Jills of the world, those who wouldn't dream of questioning the system.

As for the men and their awareness of nuances, that's a mind bender. Possibly that's part of the demon they deal with after war. That's when warriors reflect and

see those nuances they couldn't make eye contact with in the moment. Mission first. Mistress first.

KH: *You are a very funny writer. Could you say a little about how humor figures into the wives' lives in your book? Also, could you discuss how you think your humor positions readers vis-à-vis the material of your book?*

AR: I wrote *No Man's War* with universal themes in mind because military life isn't relatable in and of itself. But motherhood, friendships, marriage, those are all reflective of the human condition. Humor hovers like a cloud above all of those themes. One of the things I enjoy hearing the most from readers is that they cried on one page and were laughing by the next page. That juxtaposition of humor with horror is something that fascinates me. If we can laugh, then the horror can't control us, the more irreverent the better. Irreverence and disrespect are not the same thing. To me, irreverence is the greatest form of intimacy. It only exists when you feel an ownership, security, and level of investment in something or someone enough to step back and poke without feeling the overall beauty is compromised. Reverence is fear-based and irreverence is freedom-based.

Humor also takes the woe-is-me out of the equation. If nothing else, I did not want this book to appear to be a first-world whine fest.

KH: *I want to ask you about self-awareness and knowledge. I think it's accurate to say that you and your husband worked with each other and others to make a much better marriage. Do you aim to extend your readers' awareness and knowledge? If so, about what and to what end? Are your aims microcosmic (know thyself) or macrocosmic (look more closely at the military and war)?*

AR: We found peace when we accepted that we couldn't mind meld each other into doing and thinking what the other wanted or expected. This slow but difficult discovery was another theme that I viewed as universal. No marriage is perfect. Marriage is a leap of faith whether a couple knows each other for five weeks or five years. The more you get to know anyone, the weirder they become. You know? Very few people get to see your private self and there comes a point in marriage when spouses feel safe enough to fly their freak flags.

So my idea was to blur the line between micro and macro. Like when you lace your fingers together, they relate and become one entity. There was no difference between introspection and perspective. Both are equally important.

KH: *Three major events in your book are your heart attack, 9/11, and your attack. Could you say a little about where you prefer your readers to interpret their place in your memoir? To ask in another way, has the presence of your readers moved you toward greater awareness, maturity, and self-definition? Or as you pose in your conclusion—have you "paid a price to get [your] story out there"?*

AR: Writing a book is inherently validating. Being heard and hopefully understood is an incredible gift that everyone should experience, regardless of the genre of expression. Two quotes from Pina Bausch sum it up for me. "I'm not interested in how people move; I'm interested in what makes them move," and "Your fragility is also your strength." I had to take a long and hard look in the mirror to write this book.

In the back of my mind, always, both then and now, are the people of Afghanistan and Iraq. Women and children in particular. There but for the grace of God. My hurdles were nothing in comparison. I can't imagine the fear and worry they endured and endure still. I feared for nearly every man in my life (my husband, my friends' husbands, my neighbors' husbands, the warriors, males and female, in echelons above and below all of those soldiers) but I never feared for my children. I can't comprehend that. The greatest horror of all.

My attack was a secret I kept for years and secrets take an eventual toll. The heart attack wasn't only a result of stressors from deployments but from keeping myself closed off. But both of those life events were blessings in their own perverse way. Without the attack in my early 20s, I maybe wouldn't have had the ability to compartmentalize and feel unaffected and even indestructible to an extent. It gave me strength. Without the heart attack, my husband would have continued to deploy. There is a blessing behind every curse.

KH: *You say at one place, "Too much communication isn't always a good thing." Does the memoir sustain that claim? If so, why its concern with awareness and self-knowledge? Or, to be blunt, why not write a much shorter book? Or does your book argue for situational reticence, knowing when to shut up and when not to?*

AR: Situational reticence, absolutely. As a personal reflection, I felt that I earned the right to spit up what I swallowed for so many years. Many readers have complained that they felt my book ended too abruptly and there is a method to that madness. I'm hoping to fill in those gaps eventually.

KH: *Your book takes the idea of a "Band of Brothers" and broadens it to include a "Band of Sisters." Do you think the book dramatizes any dangers in banding together as "one army, one team" (group think, trampling on individuality, obscuring uncomfortable truths)?*

AR: There's no I in team, right? I think it's a little of both. Within the sisterhood, we did our best to maximize individual strengths and help fill in areas that possibly lacked. We took care of those who were hip deep with us. The old adage "give more than you take" is true. There was not room for perpetual neediness but of course we each had our moments of needing to take a knee. As my Mira character had a breakdown while getting her kids off to school on some random morning, that moment was not a reflection of who she was. It was a reflection of the weight and stress on her shoulders. We've all been there.

KH: *Could you say a few words about becoming a writer? Neither your academic concentrations, nor the experiences recorded in your book suggest that writing was central to your life. Did someone intervene or suggest something to you? Did you take writing classes? Did you have a mentor or other writers whose work inspired you? Are you writing something now?*

AR: Writing has been a passion that has ebbed and flowed since childhood. I also adore analyzing and interpreting human behavior. People watching. So those two passions happened to align with this unique life experience and time in our nation's history. It begged to be written. In college I took a few creative writing classes and I learned there that adverbs are the enemy of good writing. Adverbs are my favorite! So I quit following writing rules.

I see signs in everything. I saw my heart attack in 2010 as a sign to figure out how to finally begin the book that I had written in my head over the years but never talked about, not even to my husband. In 2011 he returned from his last deployment in Afghanistan and we PCS'd to Colorado Springs late that fall. Our youngest child was in full-day school and we lived off-post for the first time. One day a few months after we arrived Darrin said nonchalantly, "You should get a job." As if getting a job is the simplest thing in the world after sixteen years of being a stay-at-home mom. I applied at Pottery Barn the next week and they never called me. How depressing, right? One Tuesday morning in 2012 I saw an interview with an author on a morning talk show and it sparked an idea, so I opened my MacBook and started googling the process of writing a book. I immediately discovered that I

needed an agent. (Did I mention that I hadn't written one word for this book yet? I only had the idea.) The next thing I googled was a list of the most prestigious agents. Why not start at the top? I had no idea what I was doing. I cross-referenced that list with authors I recognized and admired. Then I wrote a three-page email and sent it to five agents. An hour later I received a response from Kim Witherspoon, the agent whose name I had starred because I loved the list of authors she represented. We spoke on the phone the next morning and I signed with Inkwell Management that afternoon. What I did not know is that I had just won the lottery of the literary world. I got extremely lucky. Right place at the right time and the right story. Literary agents get thousands of queries a year and take a tiny handful of new clients. I wrote an email, not a typical query letter. Break those rules! Sometimes rules beg to be broken. The mold begs to be shattered.

Kim and her staff guided me through the process of writing the book proposal, and then she spent a year trying to sell it to a publisher before it found a home. Several of the editors she approached thought that Americans weren't ready to read about the unvarnished reality of military families and the uglier side of that life. I suppose they needed to cling to that previously mentioned image of the romantic hero and the Army Strong family who waited patiently for the hero's return. They needed to believe the rhetoric.

KATHLEEN HARRINGTON is the Permanent Professor for English and Fine Arts at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado.Her long-term literary interests include women's narratives on war and representations of gender.

ANGELA RICKETTS holds a master's degree in social psychology/human relations and an undergraduate degree in Sociology.She is an Army wife who lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado.