

Book Review

Ashley's War: The Untold Story of a Team of Women Soldiers on the Special Ops Battlefield¹

Reviewed by Major Heidi M. Steele*

Thank you for rising to the challenge of being female warriors in today's Army . . . [Y]our presence here has been foretold by the generations of women that preceded us in military service to the nation . . . Know too that the eyes of the Army and, increasingly, the Nation, are on you. This is an opportunity for failure as much as it is [for success]. Do not block out the voices of opposition[;] study them and defeat their words and prejudices through brilliant action.²

I. Introduction

In April, 2015, the U.S. Army Ranger School opened its first class to female Soldiers.³ Many would argue that the accomplishments of the women detailed in Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's latest book, *Ashley's War: The Untold Story of a Team of Women Soldiers on the Special Ops Battlefield*, was the impetus not only for that event, but for Defense Secretary Ash Carter's decision last winter to lift all gender-based restrictions on military service.

The relatively unknown group of twelve trailblazers became the first female Soldiers to be recruited, trained, and deployed to the front lines with Special Operation units fighting the Global War on Terror in Afghanistan.⁴ Lemmon, a former Fulbright scholar, *New York Times*' bestselling author, and military spouse, has written extensively on foreign policy, national security, and global women's issues, making her uniquely situated to tell this story.⁵

II. Summary

In 2009, eight years after the 2001 U.S.-led invasion into Afghanistan, the war was at a stalemate. United States Special Operations Commander, Admiral Eric Olson, "believed that America was never going to kill its way to victory in Afghanistan," and instead, needed a more "knowledge-based" approach.⁶ Olson determined that a serious knowledge-gap existed when Special Operations Forces (SOF) failed to meaningfully engage the female populace of Afghanistan, thereby missing out on critical intelligence and social influence.⁷ After research and analysis, Olson concluded that this mission could not be accomplished by male Soldiers, since their communications with Afghan women would constitute a form of "cultural trespass."⁸ The only viable pathway to success that Olson saw was to recruit and train an elite group of female Soldiers who could serve alongside SOF Soldiers.⁹

Olson's proposals were initially met with what Lemmon

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¹ GAYLE TZEMACH LEMMON, *ASHLEY'S WAR: THE UNTOLD STORY OF A TEAM OF WOMEN SOLDIERS ON THE SPECIAL OPS BATTLEFIELD* (2015).

² LEMMON, *supra* note 1, at 144 (excerpt from Captain Tara Matthew's letter to the Cultural Support Team (CST) members upon graduation from the program).

³ See C Todd Lopez, *First Women to Attend Ranger Course*, ARMY.MIL (Jan. 16, 2015), https://www.army.mil/article/141327/First_women_to_attend_Ranger_Course/?from=RSS ("The Army announced Jan. 15 that female Soldiers will be allowed, for the first time, to attend the Army's Ranger Course . . .").

⁴ *Id.* at ix

At a time when the divide between those who volunteer to fight America's wars and those who never served is wide and growing, it is more important than ever to know who these soldiers are and why they sign up to fight for the sake of the rest of us.

Id. "I will be thankful always for the opportunity to shine a light on a world with which too few of us are familiar." *Id.* at 283.

⁵ *Gayle Tzemach Lemmon: Author and Journalist*, GAYLELEMMON, <http://gaylelemmon.com/about> (last visited May 11, 2016).

⁶ LEMMON, *supra* note 1, at 5–6. Admiral Eric Olson, who retired in August 2011, after more than thirty-eight years of service, was the "first Navy [Sea, Air and Land (SEAL)] ever to be appointed to three-star and

four-star flag rank, as well as the first naval officer to be [United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM's)] combatant commander." WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_T._Olson (last visited May 11, 2016).

⁷ LEMMON, *supra* note 1, at 5–8.

⁸ *Id.*

Pashtunwali, an unwritten tribal code governing all aspects of community life, delineates the laws and behaviors of the Pashtun people. At the heart of the system is the principal of *namus*, which defines the relationship between men and women, and establishes the primacy of chastity and sexual integrity of women within a family.

Id. at 6.

The ancient practice of *purdah*, or the seclusion of women from public view, makes women in these regions nearly invisible . . . foreign troops cause a serious affront to Afghan families when a male soldier even catches sight of a woman's face. Searching a woman is an even graver offense. By engaging with Afghan women the male soldiers are disrespecting them as well as the men in their family charged with protecting them. The act violates a code of honor that lies at the very foundation of their society.

Id. at 7.

⁹ *Id.* at 8. During his research, Olson looked to the Iraq War when conventional forces set up the "Lioness" program around 2003, which placed an ad hoc group of female Soldiers and Marines on security patrols

describes as an “unenthusiastic reception” around Special Operations Command (SOCOM) headquarters and seemed to run afoul of the U.S. military’s Direct Combat Exclusion Rule.¹⁰ However, the tide changed during the surge of U.S. troops into Afghanistan in 2010¹¹ when Olson received an official Request for Forces from Admiral William McRaven, the Commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), for female Soldiers to accompany U.S. Army Rangers on missions.¹² After consulting with his legal advisor, Olson “learned that as long as he ‘attached’ rather than ‘assigned’ women to these special operation units, he could put them almost anywhere. Including on missions with Rangers.”¹³ In the spring of 2010, the all-female SOF Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) were born.¹⁴

Lemmon introduces readers to twelve female Soldiers—including First Lieutenant Ashley White–Stumpf, the book’s main character—who were among the first to answer the call to serve on the newly-formed CSTs.¹⁵ Lemmon chronicles the women’s journey through the rigorous assessment and selection process known as the “100 Hours of Hell,” held at Camp Mackall where the candidates were subjected to a week

and checkpoints designed to prevent suicide bombings. *Id.* This program also served as a precursor to the Female Engagement Teams later established by the Marines in Afghanistan in early 2009. *Id.* at 8–13. *See also* Matt Pottinger, Hali Jilani, & Claire Russo, *Half-Hearted: Trying to Win Afghanistan without Afghan Women*, SMALL WARS J., smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/370-pottinger.pdf (last visited May 11, 2016).

¹⁰ LEMMON, *supra* note 1, at 13. On January 13, 1994, then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin officially rescinded the military’s outdated “risk rule” and in its place enacted the Direct Combat Exclusion Rule. *Id.* The new rule precluded women from “being assigned to units below brigade level where the unit’s primary mission was to engage directly in ground combat. *Id.* This policy barred women from serving in the infantry, artillery, armor, combat engineers, and special operations units of battalion size or smaller.” KRISTY KAMARCK, CONG. RESEARCH SERV., R42075, WOMEN IN COMBAT ISSUES FOR CONGRESS, at summary (2015).

¹¹ President Barack Obama sent an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan in 2010 in order to “seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity [to] allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan.” President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Dec. 1, 2009), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

¹² LEMMON, *supra* note 1, at 14–17.

McRaven was a practical problem-solver. What would have been unthinkable just five years earlier because of preconceptions about American servicewomen in combat as well as ignorance about the role of women in Afghan culture now became unavoidable. McRaven made a decision: female soldiers would now *officially* accompany the Rangers on target. Ideology be damned.

Id. at 17 (emphasis added). Admiral William McRaven retired in 2014 after more than thirty-eight years of service and after having “commanded at every level within the special operations community. . . . McRaven is credited for organizing and overseeing the execution of Operation Neptune Spear, the special ops raid that led to the death of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011.” *William H. McRaven*, WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_H._McRaven (last visited May 11, 2016).

¹³ LEMMON, *supra* note 1, at 18.

of all night work sessions and all day ruck marches, running, obstacle courses, and mental acuity testing.¹⁶ For those that made the cut, Lemmon details their intense, but abbreviated six week mission preparation program where they received training in human dynamics, cross-cultural communications, Afghan language, culture, and history, negotiation and mediation, tactical questioning, searching, and coping mechanisms for combat stress.¹⁷ Finally, Lemmon recounts their journey to Afghanistan, where they integrated with their SOF brethren and where their bravery and skills were put to the test.¹⁸

III. Strengths

Ashley’s War powerfully documents the accomplishments and sacrifices of the first all-female special operations CST. The book resonates in part because Lemmon does not push an overtly feminist agenda, but instead recognizes that letting these women’s stories speak for themselves is enough. The book is the culmination of Lemmon’s twenty-months of travel wherein she conducted hundreds of interviews with members

¹⁴ *Id.* The CSTs would not only serve alongside the Army Rangers, but also the Green Berets, the Navy SEALs, and other special mission units. *Id.* at Book Jacket.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 24. The other Soldiers chronicled in the book are: Lane Mason, Amber Treadmont, Kate Raimann, Anne Jeremy, Leda Reston, Rigby Allen, Kristen Fisher, Tristan Marsden, Kimberly Blake, Cassie Spaulding, and Sarah Walden. *Id.* Lemmon notes, however, that “[m]ost names have been changed to protect those involved and those still connected to the special operations community. Some details have been omitted for the sake of security.” *Id.* at ix. Many of the women described in the book, however, have done interviews with the press subsequent to the release of *Ashley’s War*. *See* Sandra Sobieraj Westfall, *Meet the Real-Life G.I. Janes who Served with Special Ops in Afghanistan*, PEOPLE MAG. (Apr. 24, 2015), <http://www.people.com/article/reese-witherspoon-buys-rights-army-girls-special-ops-afghanistan>.

¹⁶ LEMMON, *supra* note 1, at 53. Major Patrick McCarthy was the architect of the CST selection process which was designed to test the “[S]oldier’s ability to maintain composure, apply logic, communicate clearly and solve problems in demanding environments. It’s as much a mental test as it is a physical one.” Kevin Maurer, *In New Elite Army Unit, Women Serve alongside Special Forces, but First they Must Make the Cut*, WASH. POST (Oct. 27, 2011), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/in-new-elite-army-unit-women-serve-alongside-special-forces-but-first-they-must-make-the-cut/2011/10/06/gIQAZWOSMM_story.html.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 96.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 280.

In June 2013, the Cultural Support Teams were a topic of discussion at a Pentagon news conference focused on integrating women into jobs that previously had been off-limits to them, including roles as special operators. “Quite frankly, I was encouraged by just the physical performance of some of the young girls who aspire to go into the cultural support teams,” said the Special Operation Command’s Major General Bennet Sacolick, who called the program a “huge success.” He went on to say, “*They very well may provide a foundation for ultimate integration.*”

Id. (emphasis added).

of the CST and their families, members of the special operations community, and senior military leaders.¹⁹ Lemmon's extensive research as well as her use of vibrant imagery and engaging narrative creates a dramatic but credible story that accurately depicts the amazing journey of these young women while also capturing the nuances and complexities of the war in Afghanistan.

While Lemmon quite obviously respects the women she has chosen to write about in *Ashley's War*, she does not sugar coat problems with the CST program. Instead, she makes it a point to highlight the training inequities and lack of resources devoted to preparing the women of the CSTs for their real-world missions. By the time SOCOM and JSOC leaders finally saw a need for the CST program, Lemmon points out, "[c]ommanders were impatient for the skills female [S]oldiers could provide, and they wanted the women out doing their jobs *now*."²⁰ That lack of foresight coupled with the urgent need for female enablers resulted in the women receiving only six-weeks of training, compared to the eighteen-months to three-years their male Army Ranger and Green Beret counterparts normally receive.²¹

Still, Lemmon describes in compelling fashion how the women overcame their lack of training when they soon found themselves in the thick of it in Afghanistan: fast-roping out of aircraft in the middle of the night, humping fifty pounds of gear over miles of mountainous terrain, traversing through explosive-laden fields, entering the homes of insurgents, and running for their lives under a hail of small-arms fire.²² Throughout her narrative, Lemmon masterfully weaves in anecdotes of their bravery, resourcefulness and resilience in the face of these glaring inequities, especially that of Ashley. Ashley was a tough Soldier nicknamed "megatron quiet blonde" who could rope climb with a weighted vest using only her arms, ruck march for unlimited miles, and was known to have fashioned an office out of a broom closet just so she could be close to the Tactical Operations Center. She found a way to bake fresh bread downrange for her fellow Soldiers but was also adept at communicating with Afghan women in the middle of a combat mission while searching for insurgents and intelligence.²³ Tragically, Ashley lost her life while out on a night raid with the Rangers when a daisy-chain

IED was detonated. Lemmon poignantly closes the book with a quotation from Ashley's remembrance ceremony, delivered by a fellow CST member:

When Ashley White–Stumpf became an angel she was at the apex of her life. She was a newlywed with an incredibly loving and supporting husband. She had just purchased her first home. She had a good job and an amazing family. And yet Ashley asked, "what can I do, how can I make a difference?" Think about that for a minute. How much better would this world be if every person, at the happiest, most fulfilled point in their life, thought not of themselves, but of the good they could do for things bigger than themselves?²⁴

IV. Weaknesses

Despite the book's strong thematic messages and literary strengths, there are a few notable shortcomings. In addition to Ashley, Lemmon highlighted eleven other trailblazing young women from the first CST in *Ashley's War*. The effect, however, is that the number of characters is unwieldy, making parts of the story hard to follow, forcing the reader to refer back to their biographies contained in earlier chapters. The character treatment suffered because Lemmon was only able to develop most of them superficially, leaving the reader wanting more.

There were also a number of critical omissions, which, if addressed, would make the narrative feel more complete. Once the women deployed to Afghanistan, for instance, Lemmon focuses the remainder of the story on the females attached to the Rangers conducting the direct-action missions. She completely neglects the experiences of the women serving with the Green Berets conducting the just-as-vital village stability operations. Lemmon also fails to provide any sort of meaningful closure in the final chapters or epilogue²⁵ about what became of these female heroes once they returned home. The fate of an interpreter to which

¹⁹ *Id.* at ix.

²⁰ *Id.* at 100.

²¹ *Id.* at 96.

²² *Id.* at 198.

Amber heard the sound of small arms fire. Bullets started spraying all around them as villagers greeted them with round after round. Amber kept moving and studied the men in front of her, watching as they switched from a fast sprint to an unpredictable pattern of running and ducking, using buildings for cover. She had never had proper infantry training, only a half-day tutorial in the CST summer course. The Rangers, on the other hand, specialized in this kind of combat evasion and had prepared extensively for precisely this kind of situation. . . . [S]he coached herself as they tore through the village. Just do what these guys are doing and *do not* screw up. She kept

running. Do not let it be the girl who gets the bullet.

Id.

²³ *Id.* at 210.

²⁴ *Id.* at 281.

²⁵ See *Id.* at epilogue. First Lieutenant Jennifer Moreno, only briefly mentioned in the epilogue, was the second member of the CST program killed in Afghanistan. She died October 6, 2013. Adam Ashton, *Details of Death of Army Nurse in Afghanistan*, THE WASH. TIMES (Apr. 29, 2014), <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/apr/29/details-of-death-of-army-nurse-in-afghanistan/?page=all>. Moreno, a nurse from Madigan Army Medical Center, chose to help a wounded Soldier injured by an improvised explosive device in the middle of a booby-trapped field at an Afghan bomb-making compound, losing her life while trying to reach the Soldier. *Id.*

Lemmon devotes an entire chapter is never known. Additionally, the unfortunate timing of the book's publication leaves readers unaware that the entire CST program has been disbanded, despite the continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan.²⁶

V. Conclusion

Ashley's War is a story that needed to be told. Lemmon's book shines a spotlight on the undeniable strength, courage, and dedication of this group of women warriors, and in doing so, helps secure their place in history.²⁷ After all, the Soldiers depicted played a critical role in advancing the conversation about women in the military, from "Should they serve in combat?" to "How can we best train and equip them to serve in combat?"

²⁶ According to Lieutenant Commander Ligia Cohen, spokeswoman for U.S. Special Operations Command, the Cultural Support Team program was phased out as Afghan troops took the lead in operations. Gretel C. Kovach, "Ashley's War" an Inside Look at Cultural Support Teams and a Fallen Hero, SAN DIEGO UNION TRIB. (Apr. 4, 2015), <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2015/apr/03/ashleys-war-book-review/5/>.

²⁷ LEMMON, *supra* note 1, at 257. Lieutenant General John Mulholland, the head of the Army Special Operations Command, was quoted as saying this about the women of the CST:

Make no mistake about it, these women are warriors; these are great women who have also provided enormous operational success to us on the battlefield by virtue of their being able to contact half of the population that we normally do not interact with. They absolutely have become part of our special operations family. *They absolutely will write a new chapter in the role of women soldiers in the United States Army and our military and every single one of them have proven equal to the test.*

Id. (emphasis added).