

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

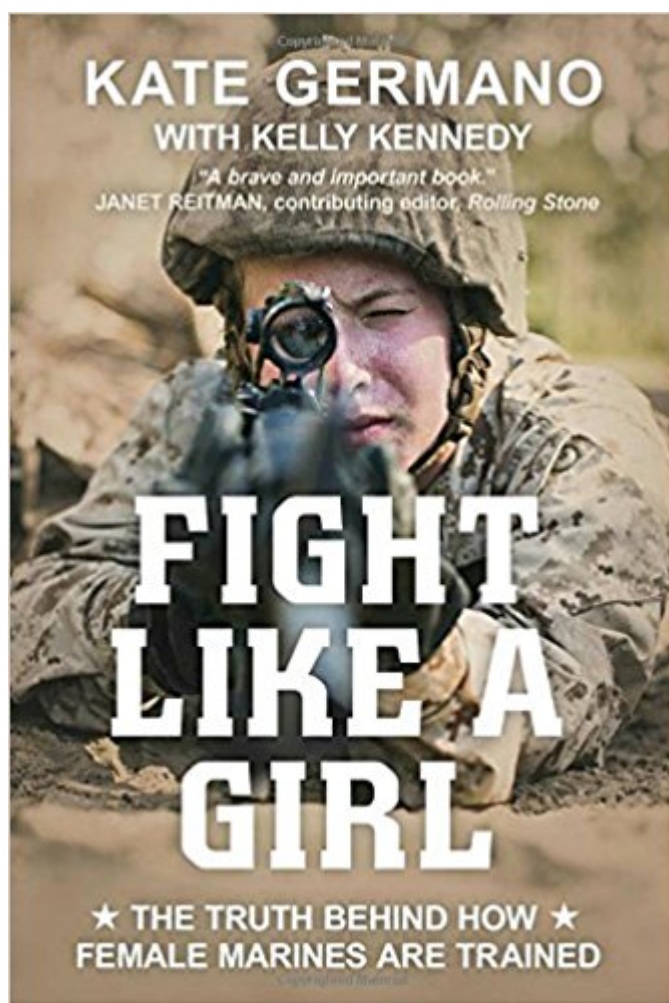
of the joint chiefs (senior leaders of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and National Guard) to ask the secretary of defense for an exception to policy in September 2015 to keep women out of ground-combat arms jobs and units. That's one way of saying it. The other way is to say that he wanted to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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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