

**New Nonfiction from Larry
Abbott: Review of Joy
Damiani's "If You Ain't
Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin'"**



JOY DAMIANI

**IF YOU AIN'T
CHEATIN'.
YOU AIN'T
TRYIN'**

**and other lessons
I learned in the Army**

Joy Damiani: *If You Ain't Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin' (and other lessons I learned in the Army)*

[Available on Amazon in Kindle and paperback versions](#)

You will hate this book. You will hate being compelled to finish Damiani's story in one sitting (you're excused if it takes two). You will hate spewing coffee (or other beverage) onto your computer keys if you are reading the book on Kindle, or sopping a few pages of the paperback, because of Damiani's humor and sarcasm. And you will hate that the story she tells is, regrettably, true, not only about her personal experiences but also about her analysis of military culture in general and the Iraq War.

Formerly known as Emily Yates, the author now goes by Joy (her middle name) Damiani (her family name). She "traded in" her "old name" to put closure on her divorce and to move ahead with new projects. As a musician and songwriter she has released a number of albums and music videos; a recent music video, a lively romp, is entitled "Brains in Meat Suits." She is also a poet. "I Am the Savage" relates to her time in Iraq, while "Yellow Ribbon" criticizes the empty patriotism of civilians who feel that a yellow ribbon on their car absolves them of complicity in war. Damiani has published essays on veterans' issues, especially the difficulties faced by women vets returning home.

She now turns to memoir. *If You Ain't Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin'* (Joy Damiani Words & Music, 2022), "Dedicated to every veteran who has lived these lessons and to every young person who learns them for the first time here," is divided into thirteen chapters that describe Damiani's teenage pre-military years, the reasons she joined the Army at age 19, her six years in the military, with two Iraq deployments writing "Army news" as a Public Affairs Specialist, and concluding chapters that assesses her experiences and offers a bit on her immediate post-deployment life.

The book begins with a brief mention of 9/11 and then a flashforward to 2004, where Damiani, as a nineteen-year old Public Affairs Specialist, has to revise the post newspaper to include a KIA report and a photograph. She “mechanically considered” the change, “calculating the dead in terms of column inches.” Then she learns that the KIA was actually a friend, Tuazon; he had only been in Iraq for two months. She had learned to separate herself from any emotions about her stories, especially about those killed, but she realizes her well-crafted professionalism is starting to crack when she thinks of all the dead and that she is just repeating a script: “A wave of nausea washes over my body . . . I was so proud of my well-rehearsed presentation—showing no sorrow, always professional! But now I seem to be playing the part without trying.” She smooths over the crack with Jim Beam.

Damiani’s journey to the Army is somewhat circuitous. Her sarcastic bent and dislike of authority lead her parents to more or less spirit her away to the Family Foundation School in order to cure her of her sins of sarcasm and rebellion. (The Family Foundation School, in Hancock, New York, closed in 2014 amid lawsuits and accusations of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse of its teenage students). In the eighteen months plus she spends at the school the only bright spot is a class in folk music, where she develops an “affinity” for Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Kris Kristofferson, among others, and writers Jack Kerouac and Hunter S. Thompson. Sure cures for rebellion! Unfortunately, Damiani is not suitably cured of her sarcasm, and she faces another six months of “supervised rock-picking.” Eventually, she decides to leave the school and hitchhikes back home to Syracuse, where her parents put her on a strict regimen in order to live at home. She also enrolls in a local community college and after six months back home gets a call from an Army recruiter, offering her, for a five-year hitch, a journalism, or “Public Affairs Specialist,” opportunity. It takes Damiani all of twelve seconds to answer in the affirmative.

She goes to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training. She stumbles through, with sprains, blisters, a broken nose, and two black eyes, but compared to her time at the Family Foundation School she writes that, "the Army's attempts at indoctrination seem almost quaint." Her rebellious tendencies are still in evidence: She does qualify in marksmanship but names her M16 A-2 rifle "Bungalow Bill" after the Beatles' song. She also pokes her finger in the eye of the Army in other ways: "The drill sergeants ignore me when I hum 'The Times, They Are A-Changin'' while on guard duty, or when I use my turn calling marching cadences to lead the platoon in a rousing chorus of 'War! What is it good for?'"

The next chapters detail Damiani's first deployment to Kuwait for training and then to Iraq. When she finally reaches Baghdad her job "is to put out a decent newspaper . . . I've come to take it seriously." Although she is still a rhombic peg in a triangular hole she does have the commitment to do her best; "the option of apathy has never even been on the table before." She has integrity about her work even as she remains cynical about the "big picture." At the same time her dream of being a real "war reporter" is evaporating: "Now, I feel defeated, rotting away in a combat-zone cubicle, waiting-wishing-for one of those incessant mortar attacks to successfully explode the headquarters." After her complaints, bordering on insubordination, Damiani does get the opportunity to go out on joint U.S. and Iraqi patrols. Unfortunately, that assignment is short-lived. Because of her criticism of an incompetent co-worker on the journalism team, she is removed from her associate editor position and basically has to cut and paste articles from Google searches. She still has seven months to go.

After a year in Iraq Damiani's cynical side begins to emerge more and more. She writes: "I've already spent the better (or worse) part of twelve months in Iraq as part of what I have come to recognize as an illegally-invading force." She notes

that Orwellian language needs to be used to present everything in a positive light. “‘Interrogation’ becomes ‘intelligence-gathering’”; the “occupation” is “‘reconstruction’”; the “war” is a “‘peace-keeping mission’”; “suicides” become “‘non-combat-related deaths.’” She feels herself to be a “foreign invader.”

Interspersed with her time in Iraq, Damiani uses flashbacks to chronicle her disastrous marriage. She was married a few months before deployment and right before her return to the States after a year in Iraq she realizes that the relationship had devolved further, that she has become “expendable.” As she sits alone in her trailer at Camp Liberty she reaches her nadir, writing that she “eyed my assault rifle and let my mind wander . . . absentmindedly measuring the distance from the trigger to the barrel, the distance from my fingers to my head.” Damiani does return home and the marriage hits bottom, involving her arrest for domestic violence and a stay in a psychiatric hospital after suicide threats. She is released after seventy-two hours and returns to work at [what base?]: “The information war must go on. The war inside my head will have to wait.” Her resentment over assignments grows: “I’ve come to accept that by the time a typical day is over, I will want to cut someone open and feed them their own intestines. I see this as a step forward in my quest for self-realization and inner peace.”

When there appears to be light at the end of the military tunnel the threat of stop-loss is the oncoming train, to paraphrase poet Robert Lowell. Damiani believes that she will be out before stop-loss takes effect, and if she re-enlists she can choose her duty, but the Army comes up with a creative way to hold on to her. They devise an Orwellian “do-not-retain,” but still deployable list, albeit a falsehood, which is a method to guarantee her second deployment to Iraq. Damiani agrees (without really agreeing) to return, and it is worth a look at her reason: “The thought crosses my mind that

I would feel like a jackass if I tried to get out of the Army on time while everyone around me shipped out. Even if it was an option, could I bring myself to be that soldier? I'm not deploying because I want to, or because I think it's a good idea. I'm doing it because deep down, I believe that if I don't do it—if I get out of it on a technicality—I will be making light of everyone else's sacrifice. I'll be saying that I am special, that I deserve to stay home when my fellow soldiers pack up and go to war, and that the contract I signed is negotiable . . . Without realizing it, despite every effort to resist the Army's conditioning and retain control of at least my own mind, I have suddenly become the kind of soldier the Army has always wanted: even when given the choice, I can't quit the team."

She returns to Iraq for fifteen months, and the Public Affairs duties are not much better. Damiani's major project is photographing visiting morale-boosting cheerleaders. She also details the secretive drinking and an attempted sexual assault by two soldiers she thought were friends. Faced with an extended deployment, she decides on the (not so) subtle course of annoying her superiors ("Intimately aware of the drastic repercussions for out-and-out revolt, I've swiveled my sights in the familiar direction of subtle rebellion. The delicate dance of expressing my displeasure while also staying out of trouble requires more finesse than I usually can claim").

This entails including quotes from Hunter S. Thompson and lyrics from Bob Dylan in official emails, to the consternation of a major and a colonel, and creating a custom-made ID badge with a decidedly unserious face.

As the memoir winds down, Damiani becomes more critical and somber about the whole enterprise, seeing failure everywhere. She writes: "As far as I can tell, five years after the 'surgical' airstrikes flashily-nicknamed 'Shock and Awe' leveled the nation's cities, government, and infrastructure, our presence in Iraq is a clear indicator that if an exit

strategy ever existed here, it has to have gone horribly awry. Either that, or—I shudder at the thought that I don't want to believe—this whole debacle could be intentional.” As a kind of bookend to the death of Tuazon mentioned at the beginning of the book, she learns of the death of a friend from her first deployment, Mele, killed by an IED. Choking back tears she is left with one thought: *“What is the fucking point of this? What. Is. The fucking. Point? Nobody is winning here.”*

The book closes in 2011, three years after Damiani's return to the States. She is twenty-nine years old. She spends some of her GI Bill at Cal Berkeley, where one of her courses includes study of the Iraq War. Her fellow students are ten years younger. To them, the war is an object of study; to her, it is still “present tense.” She writes: “My friends are still fighting it, after all. Sometimes I wonder if I am, too.” She begins to second-guess herself with “what ifs?” and “maybes.” But after all is said and done, she ends with the recognition that “The Army didn't make me blind. My sight is the clearest it's ever been.”

Although she might protest my estimation, Damiani is the type of soldier the Army *needs*. She refused to take the easy way out, to fall victim to simply “playing the game” to make her time more agreeable. Even with the disappointments, the misery, the betrayals, and the lies that she endures, sometimes with humor, sometimes with rancor, she retains the integrity of her commitment.

For further reading:

“Joy Damiani, Writer, Podcaster, Musician, and Army Veteran,” Interview with Frank Morano, <https://wabcradio.com/episode/joy-damiani-writer-podcaster-musician-and-army-veteran-11-11-2022/>

A selection of music videos:
<https://www.youtube.com/c/JoyDamiani>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/joydamianmusic/>

<https://www.wrath-bearingtree.com/2020/09/artist-profile-music-ian-emily-yates/>