

# Book Review: David Ervin on Jerad Alexander's 'VOLUNTEERS: GROWING UP IN THE FOREVER WAR'

As the United States marks the twentieth anniversary of the beginning of the Global War on Terror as well as an ugly end to the conflict's iteration in Afghanistan, it is a time for reflection. The war on the ground is over. The war of memory has begun in earnest. The canon of war memoirs from Iraq and Afghanistan is already considerable, and these works provide valuable insights into the physical and emotional landscape of the wars. Jerad Alexander's [\*Volunteers: Growing Up in the Forever War\*](#) (Algonquin Books, 2021) adds an enlisted voice to this chorus, and he goes further by using his experience to explore the societal and cultural forces that propelled segments of a generation to welcome and even seek out participation in these wars.



For Alexander, these forces were pervasive. He was raised in an Air Force family, enthralled by the sights and sounds of the F-16 his stepfather maintained and in awe of the airmen who worked with him. The ubiquity of action heroes in late-Cold War American entertainment added relish. When the jets flew to the Persian Gulf in 1990, his stepfather with them, audiences learn of the hardships imposed on military families through Alexander's detailed recollection of the time. The excitement of the war and real-life, televised action heroes balanced comingled with the poignancy, all lending to a turning point of which Alexander writes succinctly:

*"I became a zealot. It was hardwired into the landscape of my*

*life and ideas of what I was supposed to be. I had seen the footage of bombs and antiaircraft fire on television. I had seen the war movies. I had already pledged my allegiance and sung toward the waving American banner. It was easy."*

As Alexander aged his immersion eventually deepened to involvement, beginning with participation in the fringes of the American military in the form of the Civil Air Patrol. His discovery of Vietnam War literature left him wanting more still, the F-16s no longer scratching an itch, an M-16 holding sway instead. While exposure to the gravity of the Vietnam war lent him a far greater understanding of the tragedies and miseries of war, this knowledge did not deter his decision to serve. It only added a mystique that ratcheted up his desire to experience it. He found himself in the Marine Corps infantry shortly after graduating high school.

"Disillusionment," in Alexander's estimation, is a cheap word to describe what happens to an idealistic individual who serves. The author adeptly describes the grind of peacetime military life and how it ground down the ideals with which he enlisted. With the advent of 9/11, though, he saw a way out of the peacetime drudgery and a way into the experience for which he'd lived since boyhood, a reignition of those fantasies.

The author's rendition of his time in the Iraq War is interspersed throughout the book, an interesting and effective structural choice that allows him to touch on several themes of the war individually. He recounts in great detail several "firsts," as well as several revelations regarding the broader ideas he'd held about combat. Readers see his war within a rich and broad context, and thus the ideals that come to an end in the dust of western Iraq are well understood.

Alexander's expertly crafted prose keep the reader immersed and invested. The structurally unique work examines and ties several narrative threads together neatly, painting a complete portrait of a life lived under the looming shadow of the

American military empire and one of its eager participants. This intellectually and emotionally honest book will be a lynchpin in understanding veterans of the Global War on Terror and the society for which they volunteered.

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## **New Fiction from David P. Ervin: “Currents”**

Grant crouched on the sandstone and leaned on his fishing pole. The sun warmed his shoulders as he stared through the clear, green water of the Sand Fork River. Shadows of particles on the water’s surface glided across the submerged, algae-covered rocks. A dragonfly buzzed over the water. There were no fish in the pool. His boots gritted against the rock as he stood. He took a deep breath.

He looked down the narrow valley as the hot breeze buffeted him. The green walls of the gorge hemmed the river into a space barely a hundred yards wide. Hemlock and sycamore branches shaded the whitish-tan rocks that formed its jagged banks. The water meandered around the boulders for two hundred yards before it dropped below the horizon into a rapid he could only hear.

He liked the river best when he was alone. There was only what he brought with him – no bustle, no people and their motives. No one trying to show off. No one trying to scare anyone. There was just the river and its own cacophony.

He listened to all the layers of sound. The river’s whoosh echoed off the sides of the gorge. The water lapped in a steady rhythm against the rock on which he was standing. It gurgled and tinkled around an exposed log a few feet away.

Further down it poured between two rocks in a sloshing sound heavier than the gurgle. Then there was a steady thundering down at the rapids that reminded him that the river could change.

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“This next one’s a bit crazier than the last one, man, but you’re doing good so far. Just keep it up,” said Brandon.

Grant looked behind him. Brandon’s tall frame was perched on the back edge of the three-man raft, eyes intent on the rapids ahead. His freckles were conspicuous on his fair skin. The swollen, muddy river stretched along the valley behind him. Spring had so far brought only rain. The valley was dead except for the evergreens and the beginnings of red and green buds on the other trees. They glided down a calm stretch between two rapids.

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“Yeah. Right,” said Grant. He wedged his left foot tighter between the floor of the raft and its side. The roar almost a hundred yards ahead of them grew as they drifted toward it. “Man, are you sure we shouldn’t just walk the raft around this one? There’s nobody else out here if we tip over.”

“Nah, man. We’ll be totally fine. This one’s intense but it’s fuckin’ epic. Trust me,” said Brandon. He sat down and jammed his foot under the side. He nodded at Grant with a faint smile, then locked his eyes downriver. Grant said nothing and turned around. He gritted his teeth and shivered, wishing the clouds would break. He cinched the chinstrap on his plastic helmet.

He wondered how the hell he’d gotten here.

He’d run into Brandon on the campus of the state university. They’d graduated high school together, and he was a familiar

face even though they'd run in different circles then. It was the second day of classes, the second day as a new college student just a few days removed from four years in the Army infantry and a tour in Iraq. The second day of bewilderment in a sea change. They got together on weekends through the spring semester, and Brandon took him the most laid-back bars, showed him the best grocery stores and hiking spots. They talked and bonded.

When Grant spoke of Iraq and a little of combat, Brandon spoke of being a whitewater rafting guide. It was a lot like war, Brandon had said once. He'd read a lot about it, World War II mainly. You had to keep it together to survive. That took balls. This would, too. The river was like that. He'd invited him to take him rafting before the season opened, just them and the river. It'd be epic, Brandon had said.

It sounded like it could be fun. Brandon had showed him a lot so far that was. Maybe it would be like the cool parts of the Army, the air assaults and live-fire exercises. The adrenaline.

"You sure you've gone down this one when it was this high?" said Grant. The booming rapid had grown louder. "You're not bullshitting me, are you?"

"We'll be fine, man," said Brandon. "If you get thrown out, just curl up in a ball. You won't get stuck under a rock that way. The current will just push you downriver."

The image flashed through Grant's mind of being pinned against a rock by the force of the river and his mouth went dry. Brandon stood in the raft behind him. The rubber squeaked and the raft rocked. Grant turned around. Brandon was mumbling to himself and scanning the rapid ahead, eyes wide.

"Yeah," said Grant and faced front again. He pushed out a breath. The look on Brandon's face had tensed him up. It was always worse when the guy in charge was scared. His limbs felt

warm despite the chilled water that hadn't yet dried from the last rapid.

Brandon dropped to his seat and the water sloshed underneath. "Okay, man. Comin' up! You ready?! We're hitting it from the left."

Grant rolled his shoulders and gripped the tee handle of the paddle. He jammed his foot further into the crevice until it pinched his toes.

"Got it," he said, adding force to the words. He couldn't see the course of the rapids, only a drop twenty-five yards ahead and a scattering of worn boulders. The whoosh had grown into a thundering. He crouched low. "Yeah I'm ready."

His heart thumped in his chest. He heard Brandon behind him taking deep, deliberate breaths.

"You fuckin' nervous, man?" said Grant. "Shit."

"Huh-uh, nah. Remember, dig with that paddle. Push hard," said Brandon. "Okay, let's go two left!"

Grant put his paddle in the water on the left side, ensuring the entire paddle head was submerged, and pulled. They veered to the right, pointing at a narrow passage between two boulders. He dipped the paddle in the water and pulled once more.

"Okay, rest...Let's do it, man!" shouted Brandon over the intensified roar in front of them Grant stared straight ahead. He heard Brandon's paddle hit the water, then the current sucked them into the rapid.

"Left! Dig!" Brandon screamed over the din of the crashing water. "Now right!" Grant switched hands on the paddle and hunkered low as he dug the paddle into the water on the right of the raft.

They shot through the crevice. The front of the boat dropped and Grant felt weightless for an instant before it smacked the surface of the water. He stopped breathing when water came in the boat, dousing him, and then a gasp filled his lungs with air that smelled of mud. Boulders jutted out of the water and swirled all around them.

“Left, left!” said Brandon.

A wall of water to his left rose several feet above his head. His paddle was horizontal.

“Right! Right!” He flipped his hands around and leaned over the right side of the boat to get the paddle in the water. His left foot came loose. A wave underneath the boat bounced him out of the rubber seat. He scrambled to shove his foot back into the side and righted himself as the boat shot down the rapid. A wave threw the raft to the left and into a rock, stopping it and tilting them at an obscene angle.

This was it, thought Grant, and his heart fluttered.

“Back left, back left! Oh fuck back left!” said Brandon. Grant plunged the paddle in the water and pushed backward and his arms burned. The bottom of the boat hit rock then broke loose and bounced against another boulder. It sent them hurtling down the river to the left.

“Two right and two left!”

Grant caught a glimpse of calmer water further ahead as he paddled. A wave crashed against the left side of the boat and drenched him. He blinked the cold water out of his eyes.

“Two right, two left again,” said Brandon with a voice that had evened. He took a breath and paddled. The raft bobbed in the waves, and Grant heard the sucking sound underneath as it passed over them.

The raft slid down the remaining rapids, mere bumps, and

reached the calm. Brandon whooped behind him.

“Holy shit, man!” he said. “We made it! Was that not awesome?!” Grant turned around in the boat. Brandon was taking off his helmet. Water streamed from his face and through his short, red hair.

Grant looked at the rapid behind him, growing quieter as they drifted, and traced the path they’d taken with his eyes. His stomach churned at the sight of the water pounding the sides of the boulder against which they’d bumped and the tremble began.

“Okay dude, you see that rock over to the right? Let’s take a little break there,” said Brandon, pointing to a long, flat rock that jutted into the water. Grant nodded and paddled.

The raft scraped against the rock as they approached it, then made an abrupt stop. Grant still felt the motion of the waves rocking him. He propped the paddle against the wall of the raft and unsnapped the chin strap. He lifted the light helmet off and ran a hand through his wet hair. Brandon got out splashed past Grant. He tossed his lifejacket onto the rock and put his hands on his hips, regarding the rapid behind them. His chest rose and fell with deep breaths.

When Grant climbed out of the boat his legs were wobbly. He sat back down on the edge of the raft and fished his water bottle out of the dry bag.

“That, my friend, is some fucking whitewater rafting,” said Brandon with a satisfied smile. “You okay man? Looking a little pale over there.”

“I’m fine,” said Grant. He tensed his jaw. He took the life vest off and his sodden shoes squished as he stood. “Man, fuck. Is that it?” He took short, shallow breaths.

“Yeah that’s the last big one. The rest of them are babies,

nothing like that. Just an hour's worth or so until the takeout."

Grant nodded. "I almost came out of the goddamn raft," he said.

The old fear had returned in earnest, the gut-churning sense of doom like passing a pile of trash on an Iraqi road and wondering if it would explode and kill you or nail your best friend's Humvee behind you.

"Ha! Yeah. Glad you didn't," said Brandon. "We'd have been screwed."

"Yeah, especially with no fucking medevac," said Grant. He wanted to scream at him for subjecting him to some kind of cruel, pointless trick, a measuring contest he'd never entered into. "At least in the Army we were smart about shit."

He stared at Brandon, whose smile ebbed.

"Well, I didn't know it'd be this high, but still, rocks doesn't it? Figured you could handle it."

Grant shook his head, feeling the blood rushing to his face and his back stiffening. "I sure fucking can. What are you trying to prove, man?"

"What?" said Brandon. His eyebrows shot up. "Nothing, dude. This is just fun. We beat the river, you know?"

Grant glared at him. Brandon shook his head, and then walked over to the raft and dug in his bag for a Power Bar that he ate in silence.

Just fun, thought Grant. Exactly. The war wasn't just fun. It had a point. He'd gone because people had flown planes into towers his senior year, and someone had to step up and do hard things. It wasn't about fun at all. All that fear – on the roads of Iraq, the raids, the incoming – it was about serving

something other than ego.

“You hear that?” said Brandon with his mouth full. He nodded towards the rapid they’d just come through. “Listen close. That real low rumbling.”

Grant cocked his ear toward the rapid. He homed in on the deep booming of the water. His eyes narrowed as he focused on the sound.

“I hear it.”

“Know what that is?”

“No,” mumbled Grant. It was unmistakable now, a low, rolling knock beneath the higher pitched sounds of the rapid.

“Those are rocks moving along the bottom. That’s how powerful that current is. I forget the numbers on the volume of water the Sand Fork pushes, but yeah, it’s that powerful.”

“Rocks? Really?”

“Yeah man. This river’s no joke,” said Brandon.

Grant listened to the deep booms under the surface.

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That was almost the last time he’d seen Brandon. He’d taken up his invitation for a celebratory drunk at McNally’s pub the night after the trip. Grant thought it could smooth things over. Maybe he’d overreacted, misread things when his blood was up.

The Sam Adams had gone down nicely. Easy conversation flowed. And they’d noticed a couple of attractive, seemingly single girls. This could be epic, too, Brandon had said. They sidled up to them at the long wooden bar and offered them shots. They accepted, but that was all. At the first sign of their disinterest, Brandon had regaled them with tales of the river,

at how they'd nearly been killed if not for his expertise and calm. Should have seen how scared Grant was, he'd said. They weren't impressed. And neither was Grant.

He'd avoided him since. He needed no measuring contests. He needed peace.

Grant picked up his fishing pole. He listened for the rumbling of the rocks along the river bottom but did not hear them now. He unhooked the lure from the pole and flipped it into the water. The ripples dissipated as they were carried downstream.