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.