

# Loyal to the Corps: A Review of Teresa Fazio's 'Fidelis'

The motto of the U.S. Marine Corps, or USMC, is "Semper Fidelis." Commonly translated to "always faithful," the motto—adopted in 1883 upon the urging of Colonel Charles McCawley, 8<sup>th</sup> commandant of the Marine Corps—replaced earlier mottos, including "with courage" and "by sea, by land."

The definition of the motto and what it "means" to be a Marine is different for different people, and almost never exactly what one probably thinks from the outside looking in. Now commonly shortened to "Semper Fi" by Marines, the motto and its history bear testament to the essentially arbitrary way in which rules are enforced not only in and by the USMC, but by and in American society, as well. After all, "Semper Fi" means "always fi," in Latin—fi means nothing, it's a nonsensical term. Taken at face value, the reduction of a motto to shorthand underlines the motto's essential mutability. Faithful... to what? Each other, the constitution, the president? Always... since 1883?



Meaning, as every adult understands, is highly contextual. This essential truth underlines most modernist and all post-modernist art and literature. When one takes the changeable truth of life and runs it through a harsh and dogmatic set of ideals, the resulting psychical energy is sufficiently powerful to drive some people to superhuman acts of discipline, in the name of honor and self-respect, and this is very useful when fighting a dedicated enemy. It drives almost everyone else mad, according to the extent to which they failed to live up to those ideals. Some rationalize their misbehavior, building up elaborate personal philosophies to justify their actions. Others descend into pessimism and

become jaded.

Teresa Fazio is a proud former Marine, and her war memoir—*Fidelis*—grapples with that mutability at the heart of everyday life, and her own efforts to live up to ideals. It is a top rate book about war, and how serving in the Marines requires great reservoirs of emotional energy under normal circumstances, but especially on deployment to Iraq. It will resonate with anyone who has served in the military. *Fidelis* may even give military leaders something to think about when it comes to setting and enforcing rules.

The story begins with Fazio's difficult family background—a household broken by infidelity, and an abusive stepfather, the type of situation that breaks many people down and ruins their potential before they have a chance to properly begin their lives. The setting did not break Fazio. Instead, she discovered great reservoirs of personal forbearance that complemented an aptitude for science. She put herself through MIT on a Marine Corps ROTC scholarship. She also learned early to rely on herself to succeed and overcome obstacles in an effort to achieve independence in two worlds dominated by men, first, that of science, then, that of the military.

One of the threads that Fazio follows from her childhood through the military and then afterwards is her complicated relationship with femininity. Growing up, she seems to see in her mother's adultery a kind of moral hazard specific to women, and this feeling is reinforced by the masculine circles in which she moves. It takes time and great effort for Fazio to overcome this inherent bias against her own identity as a woman, both in her own estimation and from others. The parts of her memoir that deal with this question are unsparingly honest.

Once in the military, Fazio proves herself a competent leader whose attention to detail makes her ideally suited to ensuring that communications for a Battalion-sized fort ran smoothly.

The war intrudes in the form of dead bodies from outside the wire, and also mortar attacks, one of which nearly ends her life. Nevertheless, Fazio's greatest challenge arrives in the form of a man—a much older, and (not incidentally) married man, who seduces her in Iraq, and with whom she sleeps after the deployment. Far more troubling to Fazio than the embarrassment of having fallen for a manipulative adulterer is her violation of two codes: her personal code, which depended on a lifelong repudiation of using femininity to gain any advantage (in this case, the attention of a man), and her violation of her expectations of herself as an officer and a Marine.

Above all, *Fidelis* is a memoir of endurance; a story about how a person can bear up under the weight of external and internal expectations. The prose is spare and straightforward, assembled carefully, attentively, and in a way that drives the reader forward sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter all the way to the end. Capable of being experienced in a weekend, or even over the course of a single day, at 215 pages, *Fidelis* is, like Fazio's deployment, intense.

The story is also filled with moments of understated wit, such as when she describes the midnight runs necessitated by a shift schedule that required her to stay awake at night:

*Before midnight, I ran on the rough gravel roads, carrying a flashlight so trucks could spot me. Even with its bouncing beam, I could hardly see five feet ahead, and I tripped over concrete chunks, bruising my knees through OCS-issued sweats. I got up and kept running. Head-lights higher than my head screamed toward me, and I scrambled off-road to avoid them. Trucks roared past, carrying water or sewage to or away from this place; I couldn't tell. I turned around and jogged back for a freezing shower.*

Of a rebound relationship, "if I squinted, it looked like

love.” Of the internet and cell phones, technology made it easier to talk, but not to connect.”

According to Fazio, and the strict rules of the Corps, in helping a married man cheat, Fazio failed to live up to its standards of behavior. But she was surrounded by people who were skirting the system—drinking on deployment, cutting corners, focused on their own happiness and well-being first, before that of the corps. Not, in other words, being *Semper Fidelis*.

This is one of Fazio’s greatest accomplishments: she remains essentially optimistic, loyal to the Corps and to her memory of the military. In spite of the failure of various Marines to live up to the ideals of the Corps, in spite of her own inability to reach perfection, Fazio carries out her assigned duties faithfully. Making an error, even one that consumes a substantial portion of one’s energy and attention, does not define an individual, and although Fazio’s error was apparent to her at the time and since, this aspect of her life does not capture her essence any more than it captures the essence of any human. The experience could easily have ruined her as an officer and a human, embittering her and turning her toward cynicism – but she must have been a competent and caring officer, and earning a PhD at Columbia after leaving the military establishes her bona fides as an intelligent and steadfast worker.

In writing *Fidelis*, Fazio more than makes up for her in retrospect understandable transgressions, by offering aspiring young men and women a realistic and expertly-written account of what it’s like to go to war. Her unprepossessing prose, dry humor, and faithful rendition of the trials and temptations faced by deploying women should be read by anyone curious about what it was like to be a woman in the Marine Corps.

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# Representation: An interview with new literary agent Tracy Crow



*Tracy Crow, with her corgi puppy, Hope. The puppy is the newest furry member of the household, but hope is always something Crow looks for in the writing she represents.*

*Two years ago, Tracy Crow, an author, former Marine, invited me to be a part of the MilSpeak Foundation ON POINT Women Warriors Writing Workshops she took around the country, offering a free weekend of writing instruction to women veterans and veteran family members. The workshops, in Tampa and Charlotte, were creatively inspiring and a hell of a lot of fun, not only for those who attended but for the cadre of instructors she'd pulled together. I'll never forget being a part of that team.*

*At every venue we met scores of women writers, many of whom had already met Tracy in one capacity or another. They'd either attended a previous workshop, had hired her for her book doctoring skills, or had served with her in uniform. And at each location she added more people to the list of writers she offered to coach, inviting them to join online workshop groups or to send her their manuscript for one-on-one review. She seemed tireless.*

*The workshops were for writers who'd never taken any serious writing instruction as well as writers who had already been published a number of times. For Crow, it seemed a desire to be creative and to improve your skills was the only requirement for her attention.*

*Crow has often helped writers with finished manuscripts find homes for them. She'd also applied her skillful pen to help guide a manuscript from unsellable to sought after. Eventually, she realized she'd been on a pathway that led to one thing—officially becoming an advocate for writers and their work. Tracy has now opened the doors to Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC and is now representing more than a dozen authors. I wanted to talk to her about that.*

*While I spoke to Tracy over the phone, she apologized for the hullabaloo her furry friends were making in the background. Since they are often the subjects of her social media posts, I already knew there were any number of things a black lab, a yellow lab, a beagle-anatolian shepherd, and a corgi puppy can get into when their mom's back is turned. Most of the time, I couldn't actually hear them through the connection, but evidently, as soon as we started to converse, they had all decided it was time to gnaw on their bone chews. I can only imagine what that sounded like.*

*How many books have you helped bring to the market?*

I can tell you that just prior to my making a decision to become an agent, I had helped place four books in eighteen months. And that was when I really started thinking seriously about it. But what helped me make the decision, was when [an author] I was working with asked me if I'd feel comfortable opening the door for her for a particular publisher. Just prior to that, a different author's book had come out and I realized that something in this book had been left out. I felt, at the time, that it wasn't for me to say anything and I figured the publisher would catch it, but they didn't and that left me feeling responsible. The writer didn't have an agent, but I'd turned her over to the publisher, assuming they would take care [of the missing piece] but they didn't. The bottom line is, when [the new author] asked me to help her with a publisher, I told her I was at the stage where I really felt guilty if I wasn't able to walk a writer through the entire

process. If I'm not an agent, I can't represent the writers the way they deserve.

I did end up helping [the author] get her book in front of [the publisher], giving her instructions to call me with any questions because it can be a complicated process. So now, her book is with them and in their publishing pipeline. A few months later, I realized I was ready. So I formed the LLC and I haven't looked back.

*Are you mostly getting submissions from word-of-mouth or are you on Agentquery.com or any of the other agent solicitation sites?*

I'm on Publishers Marketplace, but I'm getting as many manuscripts as I can comfortably handle. When you've gone through an MFA program and all of your MFA writing friends realize they have an agent among them, things can go a little crazy. They all start sending you their manuscripts and they all start referring their friends. And these are all excellent writers. I mean, really, really good writers. So it's not like I have to go digging and searching as a lot of new agents might have to do. A lot of good work is coming my way. Of course I follow the latest trends, but I don't really need to go searching for manuscripts. In fact I have to be very selective. I'm boutique. It's just me. So far. And there are only so many hours in a day, only so much I can read at a time. And I have this thing—that is, if I say I'm going to read your work, that doesn't mean you're going to hear from me in six months. You're going to hear from me within 10 days. Ten days to two weeks at the most. That's a pipeline I need to keep moving. I can only read so many, and handle all of the other work I do during the day, like sending out pitches to publishers, doing research to find the right strategy and the right fit with publishing houses and certain editors and their preferences with what I have as clients.

I also have a number of clients in various stages. I have some

who are finished and their work has been pitched and their manuscripts are being read by the large houses. I have several who are finishing first drafts, but because they have already written or published heavily elsewhere and I know their work and their quality, I have agreed to sign them for their new book.

Then I have one young man, who is only 22, brilliant, came to me as a referral but the work needs a lot of editing. But because the concept for this six-book series is so brilliant, I couldn't say no. I told him that this is going to be a six-month-long, intensive, MFA-level instruction and revision effort, and if he was up for that, then I would sign him. So this is intensive for both of us. Every day I have a couple of hours of editing and instruction for him. But the concept [for his series] is so brilliant. I was pleased that he had gotten 455 pages to this point, but we just have to up the diction, up the level of quality of the storytelling. The story is all there.

So I have all of these different clients in various stages. It's like having a bunch of plates spinning at different speeds, and you've got to keep each one spinning at the right speed for that particular client. It's a little crazy.

*You're not just representing writers, teaching writing, you are doing developmental editing as well. You can't get much more full service than that.*

Yes. It used to be that I would charge for developmental editing. I can't charge for that anymore since forming the literary agency, and that was a big part of my financial income that I had to give away in order to do the agent thing. From an ethical standard, as an agent, I can't charge someone for any sort of reading or editing. I either agree to represent you and take the work as it is and we work on it from there or we don't. Anything else is unethical. There's a lot of developmental editing projects I've had to walk away

from because I knew the writer wanted to be my client at some point, but I couldn't do both.

I've told others to go through an additional rewrite, and bring it to me and if we're that much further along, then I can do it. It's just this one, young 22-year-old that I've agreed to go this heavy with.

*What kind of work are you most attracted to?*

✘ The kind of work that I would have the easiest success in placing would be military writers, or writers with military stories, because that's what I know the best and that's where I have the most contacts, and the community for support and all of that. But I have clients who are writing science fiction or fantasy that I'm excited about. I have clients that are writing upmarket women's fiction. I have a romance novelist and a cozy mystery writer. The only things that I'm not interested in representing are crime or anything horror related, or anything that's too violent.

Recently I had to turn away the cleanest manuscript I've ever seen in my writing life by a very, very famous writer because there was so much gratuitous stuff that I knew I couldn't advocate for it.. Then the next day, I'm saying yes to this young kid whose quality of writing is not there but the story is brilliant, and I want to help prepare him and get his work ready for the world. Some decisions are pretty easy and simple to make, but most of them are hard. Anytime I have to say no, it gets me in the gut because I've been on that end and I know what that feels like.

Of course, I'm receiving no's all day. I'm sending pitches all day to editors and hearing ... 'you know that's great but it's not quite close enough to what we want for a romance,' or 'It's on the fence,' or 'If it was only this,' or 'If it was only that.' I'm getting rejections all day, which just means I have to switch up my pitch or find a new way to approach it.

And that's usually what it takes, just the right moment of timing.

It's like when I was selling real estate (in the 1990s). It feels a little like finding that perfect buyer for that perfect home. When it happens, it's a no brainer and the buyer says 'of course it's this house'. Connecting a manuscript with the right editor and publisher feels a little like that.

*What kind of things would a writer do that would cause you to reject the manuscript?*

A lot of writers, especially if they're new, will completely ignore what you've put out there as instruction for how you wish to be contacted. I understand it, because I've been at every stage of this. I understand how hard it can be, so I'm very forgiving and I don't automatically reject anyone ... unless they describe the work as a crime thriller ... because I'm not subjecting myself to that. I'm not into hard crime and horror.

Aside from that, it's the writing. I had to turn away a fellow grad school friend because the manuscript was fairly well written but the story didn't hold together. I know that in order for me to help that writer get the manuscript to a level that I could represent it would require a lot of work from me. So when I'm looking at a manuscript, I have to ask myself, how much do I love this work? How much of myself am I willing to give to it?

I'm beginning to understand why so many people are getting rejections. If the work isn't slam dunk there, agents don't have the time or they don't have the skill to give the work the developmental edit it needs.

*I should mention that Tracy is a former assistant professor of creative writing and journalism and has years of experience guiding authors to greatness. She told me a story about one writer whose work was under consideration with an editor she*

*knew. The editor told her he'd read the manuscript but was going to reject it because he felt something was missing. When Tracy read the work, she said the problem looked obvious to her. She consulted with the writer and made a few thematic suggestions. The writer made the changes, and now the book is in the publishing pipeline. She went on to say this:*

How many agents have the time or the developmental chops to make something like that happen? I understand now why so many writers are receiving rejection after rejection. No. No. No. No., and they have no idea how to fix something that could be great work. Agents and editors simply don't have the time, or a teaching background in most cases, so the writer never hears from them about what is missing.

And this is what I thought I could gift to my clients. If I see really solid promise in the writing, the language, the way the writer makes connections, the way the writer develops characters on the page, if they're indelible to me, if they speak to me—yet certain holes are obvious—then I'm going to give it everything I've got. If the writer demonstrates the ability to take it to the next level, then I'm open to it. Most agents would not have the time or energy for that.

*When did you officially start as an agent?*

I formed the LLC at the end of May. Since then the manuscripts have come in, I have had all this reading to do and I had to decide who would be my first clients. The first few weeks were just reading, reading, reading. I started pitching around early August, so we're just really in the first weeks of this. We have gotten really close already. There was a lot of talking and back and forth, and I thought we would be getting an offer from one, but it turned out to not be the right fit. I feel really good about this manuscript and it's being considered at several other houses right now.

All of this takes time. And editors will take weeks to read

something, then they send it to others to read, then it goes to marketing and they have all of these discussions before they ever contact me. So even though we started pitching in August, we're just beginning to hear back from editors and publishers.

*What about marketing? When you look at the manuscript, you look for good writing, good character development, but are you looking at marketability in terms of how much money the book could make? There's a lot of literary work that is wonderful, but will never make any money. How much does that impact your decision?*

There are publishers who will entertain books like that and I would go there first with a certain type of manuscript. I don't really think in terms of market because it's so slippery and I'm not following exact trends. I'm looking for the best story, the one that's going to stick with me. If I can remember the details and the characters, then I know there will be other readers who will feel the same thing. If it's the kind of book that would make a good book club discussion, then I feel that a number, at least a handful of publishers might be interested in it. So it's just a matter of finding the right one. The perfect buyer for the perfect home.

I know it's always frustrating for a writer when they find out that the marketing department was involved in the reject. They think, how am I going to compete with that? I just think that every book will find its way into the world. I know it may sound really woo woo—I tell my clients, if you're going to play with me, you're going to have to understand the woo woo parts—I tell them, if this is all about money for you, you're going to be disappointed. If this is about getting your work into the right vehicle to get it into the world, I'm your agent. We're going to find a vehicle that makes sense for your work. We also have to allow for the mystery of it. We can't force it. The only thing I can force is to make sure I'm working every day for these writers. I can only ensure I'm

opening as many doors and making as many opportunities for these writers as I can, since I'm the gatekeeper—the only way they're going to get to these publishers.

*This is a background kind of question but, I was just wondering. Why did you join the Marine Corps?*

Well, I actually wanted to join the Air Force, because I thought I'd look better in blue. They had military police and police dogs, and I wanted to get involved with that. But I found out there was a six-month waiting period. I didn't have the patience for that. So then I went down the hall and talked to the Navy recruiter. Same thing. Six-month waiting period. Then I went to talk to the Army recruiters and they also had a six-month waiting period. I was actually walking out of the building when the Marine recruiter stopped me and said, "You've checked out everybody else all morning. Aren't you even going to ask me any questions?"

Remember, this is 1977, I'd never had a single family member in the military. I looked at this recruiter and said, "You have women in the Marine Corps?" And he said, "Come on in here. Let me show you a film." Three weeks later I'm at Parris Island.

*How long were you in the Marines?*

Ten years.



*Tracy Crow, center, with attendees of an On Point writing workshop.*

*Back to the agent stuff. Do you think you're close to placing something now?*

I feel like I'm getting so much good feedback from my romance

writer's book. It's the military version of The Ya Ya Sisterhood. It's really intriguing, it's really good, and it's written by the first woman JAG (Judge Advocate General) officer to go into combat and it was down in Panama. It's her first book. I met her in one of my workshops we held in Tampa. She's been workshopping with me for a year. When she finished the book, she came to me.

I do these free workshops every month ... four pro-bono workshops every month with these different women veterans groups including military spouses. So, she'd been working on this book for a year and she asked if I would look at it in terms of something I might want to represent. I told her I absolutely want to represent this.

She's also writing a cozy mystery ... it's not bloody ... it's not violent and it also has some amazing redeeming qualities in terms of the storyline that I'm always looking for. I like it when the story demonstrates a higher purpose. What's the point? Are we just adding to the noise out there, or are we enhancing something?

But this author is really in her lane with the cozy mysteries and I expect she will write one a year and will eventually sign a multiple-book contract with someone.

I'm close with several books, but I know that my authors are counting the days and anticipating my weekly emails.

I do something that I don't think any other agents are doing. When I've had agents, I could go months without ever hearing from anybody. So, I send every one of my clients a Thursday weekly update. They're going to hear from me every Thursday. They're going to know what pitches went out and who we heard back from. Now, if I have an editor that is showing interest, I'm not going to make them wait until Thursday for that. Every one of my clients will be getting their Thursday updates.

*That's unheard of!*

I know. It's not fun when you don't have a bunch of good news. It's not fun when you have rejections to report but at least they know. Those who have had agents before, they're blown away by the level of access and weekly check-ins. Now, the clients that have never had an agent, they don't have anything to compare it to, so they're just ...'Thanks for the update!'

I know what they're feeling. Every time they check their email. Is there going to be something? I know that feeling. But at the same time I want them to have access and know they have an agent who is working for them every day and every week and they're not just a client. They matter to me.

You also have to prepare them because sometimes this process can be slow, and other times it feels like it happens overnight. Editors move, they change publishing houses, and then all of a sudden that editor who I knew there who had to say no, can suddenly say yes to something over here. You just have to wait and you have to have faith in your work and faith in one another and give it that time to find its right, perfect vehicle into the world.

*It sounds like this is exactly what Tracy Crow should be doing right now. Is that how it feels?*

Since I got my MFA in 2005, I've had at least a dozen friends say that I really should be an agent. My husband would ask me why I wasn't an agent. I have to tell you this feels really good, to feel like I'm the champion of these writers and I can go around telling people, 'You've got to read this.' It feels so good to cheerlead and to champion on behalf of writers who maybe would have been rejected maybe dozens and dozens of times because the market is so flooded with stuff. It's joyful. It really is.

*Is there anything you wish I'd asked that I haven't asked you?*

I'm really impressed with what I'm reading today, as opposed to what I was reading in 2005. Back in 2005, when I would read

that writers were getting rejected, it was like they wanted to jump off a bridge or something. Now, what I'm reading is that writers are like ... Next? They may not know why they were rejected but they're not giving up. They have stories to tell and I'm seeing a difference in attitude. It's almost like writers today, and I'm sure I'm generalizing too much, writers almost have this attitude now, that they're going to write regardless. And maybe it's because of the freedom the self-publishing pathway has opened up and offered. It's almost like they will try the traditional way but the traditional way is not going to be the final gatekeeper. And I love that. I applaud that. I want to encourage that. I tell all my writers, look, we may be going this route, but let's not get so hung up on this that we miss other possibilities. Stay open to however it unfolds. I just admire how many people know they are good writers. They know they have stories to tell. I just admire the attitude of writers today, which is ... 'I'm gonna go write another book.' That the most important thing is being creative and allowing that creative opportunity, and not allowing people like agents or editors to steal your joy from that.

*I'm wondering if the discipline you're seeing and this determination is because your clients have some kind of military connection. Do you think it's because of that, that they are so determined?*

*At this point, the dogs went berserk. There was barking, the sound of nails sliding across the floor and a brief bit of chaos. Tracy was shooing them out of the room, telling me to hold on because she really wanted to answer that question. When she came back, I didn't have to remind her what the question was. She jumped right in.*

What I'm seeing in various chatroom groups, various Facebook groups, there's a level of frustration at times, yes. But I'm noticing that people are saying, 'I'm still writing, I'm still going,' and these people aren't military. It's just a major change. I have friends who stopped writing after their first

rejection. They haven't written since 2005. Now, it's almost like I'm seeing a different attitude that what is more important is the creativity. And they're saying, what if things fall apart and nobody ever gives them this validation they think they need to continue their work ... and I've been there, I've needed that validation too. They still know they have a self-publishing pathway that is gaining in esteem if the work is good.

[Self-publishing is] no longer considered so negative. In 2011, I published my first book that way and was scared to death my academic creative writing colleagues would discover that I had, and I would lose my job. I just think the self-publishing avenue has taken a little bit of the pressure off because they know there's still a way they can do it. They know they can still reach readers and still find their own market. I love it!

*It's clear that Tracy loves the work. You can see the amount of heart she gives when she's with writers in her workshops or any writer gatherings. People flock to her and appreciate the energy, joy, and support she gives. This agent thing is the right path for her.*

*Tracy says if you'd like to query her, send her a synopsis of your work. She'll give it a read and if she feels like it's something she can advocate for, she will ask for the manuscript. She said she's reading queries and manuscripts from writers all the time. Contact her at [Tracy@TracyCrow.com](mailto:Tracy@TracyCrow.com) and include QUERY in the subject line.*

☒ **Tracy Crow** is host and producer of the podcast, Accept Your Gifts: The 22-Minute Podcast for Inspiring Your Most Creative Life, a twice-weekly program with listeners in 12 countries.

She is also the founder of Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC,

and the president and CEO of MilSpeak Foundation, Inc., a 501 (c) 3 organization dedicated toward supporting the creative endeavors of military servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

Tracy is the author/editor of six books to include the novella, *Cooper's Hawk: The Remembering*; the popular history, *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan* with co-author Jerri Bell; the award-winning memoir, *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine*; the military conspiracy thriller, *An Unlawful Order*, under her pen name, Carver Greene; the true story collection, *Red, White, & True: Stories from Veterans and Families, WWII to Present*; and the breakthrough writing text, *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story*, in which Tracy combines her skills and experience as a former Marine Corps officer, award-winning military journalist, author, editor, and assistant professor of creative writing and journalism. Tracy's short stories and essays have also appeared in a number of literary journals and anthologies.

She has a B.A. in creative writing from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and an MFA in creative writing from Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina. She and her husband, Mark Weidemaier, an MLB lifer, live on ten storybook acres in central North Carolina with their four dogs – Cash, Fenway, Hadley, and Hope.

### **The interviewer- M. L. Doyle**

✘ M.L. Doyle calls on her years of serving as an Army Reservist to write about women in combat boots. Mary is the author of *The Peacekeeper's Photograph*, *The Sapper's Plot* and *The General's Ambition* in her Master Sergeant Harper mystery series. She has also penned *The Bonding Spell* and *The Bonding Blade*, in a planned three-book *Desert Goddess* urban fantasy series. *Limited Partnerships*, is her four-novella erotic romance series.

She co-authored the memoirs of two brave soldiers to ensure their stories keep their proper place in history. The memoir, *I'm Still Standing: From Captured Soldier to Free Citizen, My Journey Home* (Touchstone, 2010) with Spec. (Ret) Shoshana Johnson, an African-American POW of the Iraq War, was finalist in the NAACP Image Award. She also co-authored with Brig. Gen (Ret.) Julia Cleckley the story of her rise through Army ranks from humble beginnings despite great personal tragedy. *A Promise Fulfilled, My Life as a Wife and Mother, Soldier and General Officer* was published in 2015.

Mary's essays, reviews and interviews have appeared in *The War Horse*, *The Goodman project*, and *0-Dark Thirty*. She is part of the fiction editorial panel of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*.

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## **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.