ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Drowning in the Desert: A JAG's Search for Justice in Iraq
Deborah A. Gembara
Vivian H. Gembara
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“They say the only good morning in a war zone is the morning you leave,” the author writes. She has experienced many difficult mornings in Iraq, where she serves as a U.S. army lawyer, otherwise known as a JAG (Judge Advocate General). Handling anything from detainments to divorces, she and her small staff act as legal counsel for over 3,000 soldiers. They also advise commanders about what they are permitted to target and how the Iraqi justice system functions. If managing all this while sporting a bulletproof flak jacket and a Kevlar helmet is not enough, the author is thrust into putting two soldiers on trial in Iraq for possible desertion. And when an adolescent’s body is found in the Tigris River, she is forced to investigate the conduct of American soldiers.

The author adeptly balances detailed descriptions of day-to-day events at her base, Camp Anaconda, without losing the reader along the way with either legal or military jargon. Acronyms are carefully explained after being used in casual dialogue. INTSUM is the intelligence summary, a rehash of nightly enemy activity or intelligence; RPGs are rocket-propelled grenades. Ongoing logistical frustrations compound the legal work, whether in securing safe transportation to interview witnesses or in building a structure to serve as the chapel/courtroom. Nonetheless, the author forges strong friendships with other soldiers throughout the daily stress and maintains a sense of humor. She laughs hard as Captain Noel Pace, a specialist in vaccination and insecticide risks, shimmies into a stack of wooden benches, a structure constructed for his safety in a former Iraqi airbase cafeteria.

Tragedies abound in this land, where brigade headquarters personnel spend Christmas Eve mourning the death of three civil affairs soldiers killed by a bomb under their Humvee. JAG corps senior officers die when their Blackhawk helicopter is downed in a flight from Baghdad. Any kind of traveling “outside the wire” of the base is risky. To address Iraqi losses, the author handles U.S. solatia payments as “expressions of condolence” to the family of Iraqi citizens who are killed or injured as a result of American actions.

Whether or not readers agree with the U.S.’s involvement in Iraq, this book offers an eye-opening glimpse at a unique lifestyle. It presents a compelling story of the bravery and work ethic found among some army soldiers as well as the dishonesty of others which leads to cover-ups.