

No Fags in the Foxhole

THERE'S SOMETHING a little wonderful about this exploration of alienation, secrecy, privacy and privation—though it's probably not what the author had in mind when he wrote it. A National Guard engineer in the early 2000's, six months before he was due to finish his service, Bronson Lemer was sent to Iraq under the protection and prohibitions of the "Don't ask, don't tell" (DADT) policy. Already disenchanted with military service, the 22-year-old left behind not only his country but also a year-long romance and his identity as an openly gay man.

There are plenty of conflicts inherent in Lemer's situation, and they shape the emotional plot as he resolves to think of himself as a team member and an asexual being: "I found [power] in the military. I like the power of firing a rifle at silhouetted targets, of throwing a grenade and watching things blow up. Most of all, I like being part of a team." The somewhat adolescent excitement he feels about the firepower is offset by the requirement to dampen his sexuality, but Lemer works at blending in, at not calling attention to himself, without overtly lying. One of the subtler conflicts he faced is that DADT sometimes protects gays even while threatening them with expulsion from the military. Lemer alternates between wanting to tell his truth and determining to keep it a secret for fear of losing the comradeship of his peers.

Lemer doesn't much engage with the idea that everyone around him probably feels just as alienated, different, and lonely—not to mention sexually frustrated—as he does. He seems to regard his queerness as uniquely isolating, frequently claiming that his reactions to the war and the environment are unlike those of his unit mates. However, he never considers that other young men and women may feel left out or "queer" for other reasons, such as being a member of an ethnic or racial minority, or because of class issues, mental health issues, or even being gay.

While the book focuses on the emotional difficulties of liv-

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How a Gay, Hammer-Swinging
Twentysomething Survived
a Year in Iraq**

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consciousness, even inside a secure compound.

At the same time, unsurprisingly, they developed a predictable, however bizarre, tolerance and taste for violence, as evidenced by their cruelty to insects, small animals, larger animals, and each other. "You give a young man a rifle, and he's going to want to fire it ... his desire is the power the weapon brings, how one shot from the instrument can instantly justify his presence in war. ... We all want to shoot at something in Iraq, just to get the satisfaction of killing another living thing." Recognizing and resisting the impulse towards brutality, Lemer instead focused on the good he's doing in Iraq, winning hearts and minds by doling out rations of army food and negotiating good-humored interactions.

It's not clear how much of Lemer's dissatisfaction with military life stemmed from his suppressed sexuality. Although he disliked the reality of service, he took pride in an abstract "service" and expressed an uncritical faith in government. Reading opinion pieces about Bush's oil-centric motives for invading Iraq, he dismissed them as "conspiracy theories" and then got back to risking his life for the country that was denying his rights.

Lemer writes almost exclusively in the present tense, including in the main narrative, in e-mails to his ex, Jeremy, and in some essay-like chapters such as "Dump Gulls." This strategy provides a sense of immediacy but also contributes to a lack of finality and emotional closure. Despite his continual re-evaluation of his values during and after his active duty, all the introspection is not ultimately conclusive. He reaches new understanding of his position, but he's no less conflicted at the end than before his deployment. Willingly compromised, Lemer bemoans his "bad decision" but never reneges on his

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commitment. However, he does take unusual responsibility for his difficulties:

Lately I've been thinking about distancing myself from the men in my platoon. I thought it would be easy being a gay soldier and having nothing to talk about with them. I thought the other men would easily figure it out and chastise me. But nothing like that every happened. ... I've found that I can't simply detach myself from them. If I did I would be the one creating a riff [*sic*] in our military bond; I would be the one making it difficult for gay men and women to serve in the military, and that's not what I wanted. I wanted to show that being gay in the military really doesn't (and shouldn't) matter.

Of course, while it may not matter to the military as a whole, it matters a great deal to the individual gay men and women who serve, and this book is an account of how and why it matters. The memoir is recommended reading for anyone who might think that a gay soldier might be any less devoted, dedicated, or deserving of military honors than a straight one. In fact, the former carries more invisible scars than their heterosexual brothers and sisters in arms.

Lemer's somewhat unresolved narrative may reflect an unresolved life. Nevertheless, his dedication to honest writing and open disclosure serves him well in this revealing and often compelling account of military service.