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Fighting for Someone Else

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A Soldier's Life: A Black Woman's Rise from Army Brat to Six Triple Eight Champion. By Edna W. Cummings. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2025. Pp. 280. \$29.95 (hardcover and ebook).

Counting on Death: A Marine Infantryman's Journey from the Front Lines of Combat to the Fight for Peace. By Joshua Shores. Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2025. Pp. 160. \$32.95 (hardcover); \$19.95 (ebook).

I know of no coordinating effort between the authors of *A Soldier's Life* and *Counting on Death*. When placed side by side, however, the books form a sort of duality. Even the color schemes on the sleeves contrast. The lively blue and silver cover of *A Soldier's Life* depicts confident and defiant faces of Black women marching during a victory parade in an overcast yet liberated European town. The deep gold and black cover of *Counting on Death* shows a solitary faceless rifleman in full battle rattle against a dark backdrop, perhaps glaring back at the reader from across a bed of sunflowers (an image that proves pivotal later). Is he deciding whether to point and shoot? Is he alone? Is this supposed to be the author or is it someone else?

The authors of these contrasting books at first glance have very little in common. Edna Cummings' work is part of a scholarly series, complete with appendices and a subject index. Joshua Shores' account is a raw and part-autobiographical sketch. Cummings writes as a Black woman of the boomer generation. Joshua Shores writes as a millennial White man. Cummings

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remembers 11 September 2001 as a recent U.S. Army War College graduate attending a funeral 48 kilometers from the Pentagon. Shores remembers the same day in Wisconsin as a student in an art class drawing a picture of a sniper overlaid with the Afghani flag.

Cummings can speak of her decades of service as a rise out of obscurity. She served in the U.S. Army during the Cold War and Gulf War and retired as a colonel. Shores speaks of his years overseas as a journey through a horrific crucible. He served in the U.S. Marine Corps during the Global War on Terrorism and ended his enlisted time as a corporal. Cummings insists she has no regrets about her military service despite years of hardship as an ethnic minority and a widow. Shores struggles to express his mixed sense of honor and shame at his service, especially as he rehearses some fateful decisions on his first deployment.

Cummings wants to record the grace and dignity that can inform a soldier's life. Shores wants to relay what it is like to stare death in face. That both stories can be told with detail and conviction from within the same military is remarkable. There is so much diversity of experience within the unity of standards. Senior military leaders have always known there is quite a lot that could divide the force from within: gaps of generation, rank, specialty, experience, temperament, beliefs, sense of purpose in life, morality, extent of liberty, or the pursuit of happiness.

These authors remind readers that the military changes a person with its many subcultures; no single person can represent the entirety of a military because even if demographics were similar across the board, differences would persist. A woman who enlists out of high school will likely have trouble relating to her identical twin who struggled to graduate top of her class at a Service academy and commissioned. Life in the barracks is not life in the field, and neither resembles the suburbia of military housing nor the chaos of a combat zone. There is probably no single posture or platitude any civilian can adopt to thank everyone for their service even if limited to veterans of the same campaign of the same war, as if an intelligence analyst, a mailroom clerk, a sniper, a paratrooper, a medic, a tanker, an aide de camp, a nuclear submarine technician, and a fighter pilot have had the same share or type of suffering and sacrifice.

If there is a coordinating effort that can result from reading these two markedly different memoirs side by side, whether it is between these authors or just their readership, it is a chance for mutual understanding. It is not just that both Cummings and Shores volunteered and now possess DD-214s after rendering their service to support and defend the same nation—as if their shared bond went no deeper than an opportunity to salute the same flag in civilian attire during the national anthem at a ball game. All these years removed, both have decided not to keep their stories to themselves.

To dig a bit more into their biographies, both had fathers who commanded

their respect, who served before them in their respective branches, and provided a role model. Both had spouses who were supportive and patient through trials. Both quite vulnerably describe long and winding grieving processes and a yearning for the way things are supposed to be.

A closer reading reveals what Cummings and Shores ultimately have in common: a sense of altruism—a concept echoing the Italian *altrui*, or “someone else.” Their books are not about them, not really. The stories are not intended to pass on advice or trite life lessons either. They spend the bulk of their memoirs considering someone else, first in how their stories would look to another person, and in their epilogues, advocating for others. Their willingness to fight endures, though the fight has drastically changed.

For all the inward focus that can often result from a memoir, Cummings and Shores remain squarely focused on people outside of their immediate social circle. Whether championing the past or fighting for the future, they reflect on the deep distortions and degradations of racism. Cummings laments the treatment of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps in the era of segregation and “Double V” campaign.¹ Shores laments the treatment of nameless Iraqi civilians caught in the crossfire on the streets of ar-Ramadi, Iraq. Cummings sees a need for representation. Shores identifies a lack of specialized training or ethical reflection for young immature infantrymen pushed straight into combat.

Both writers tap into why some causes seem more worthwhile to the everyday person than others, even if they know they probably fight on the losing side. Both help readers understand that the most intense day of military service, whether in the form of combat or crippling administrative burdens amid tragedies in one’s personal life, is preceded by a thousand routine decisions and formative experiences, advances and setbacks, and followed by a thousand ways during the course of a lifetime to reflect on what happened. Both offer an account, in their own words, of how the decision to fight for one’s country (not just for its defense, but for its reputation and well-being) is at its most powerful, compelling, and dangerous when it is rooted in a genuine concern for someone else.

Both writers remind their readers that the surges of adrenaline or dopamine that come with an accomplishment or hair-raising experiences are short lived, and that true courage is, to paraphrase C. S. Lewis, virtue at the testing point.² For Cummings that virtue is equity. For Shores, it is discretion. The question for any present or future conflict is whether the U.S. military, precisely because it is so diverse, might be poised to embody both virtues at once.

¹ Double V or Double Victory refers to a slogan and campaign by the *Pittsburgh Courier* launched in 1942 to fight against fascism overseas and racism/segregation at home.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), 148.

