

Ashley's War

Harper Perennial

By Gayle Tzemach Lemmon
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Introduction

In 2010, the Army created Cultural Support Teams, a secret pilot program to insert women alongside Special Operations soldiers battling in Afghanistan. The Army reasoned that women could play a unique role on Special Ops teams: accompanying their male colleagues on raids and, while those soldiers were searching for insurgents, questioning the mothers, sisters, daughters and wives living at the compound. Their presence had a calming effect on enemy households, but more importantly, the CSTs were able to search adult women for weapons and gather crucial intelligence. They could build relationships—woman to woman—in ways that male soldiers in an Islamic country never could.

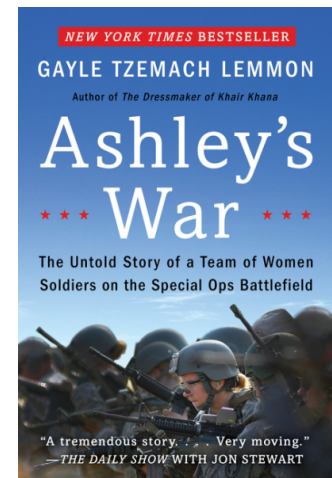
In *Ashley's War*, Gayle Tzemach Lemmon uses on-the-ground reporting and a finely tuned understanding of the complexities of war to tell the story of CST-2, a unit of women hand-picked from the Army to serve in this highly specialized and challenging role. The pioneers of CST-2 proved for the first time, at least to some grizzled Special Operations soldiers, that women might be physically and mentally tough enough to become one of them.

The price of this professional acceptance came in personal loss and social isolation: the only people who really understand the women of CST-2 are each other. At the center of this story is a friendship cemented by "Glee," video games, and the shared perils and seductive powers of up-close combat. At the heart of the team is the tale of a beloved and effective soldier, Ashley White.

Much as she did in her bestselling *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*, Lemmon transports readers to a world they previously had no idea existed: a community of women called to fulfill the military's mission to "win hearts and minds" and bound together by danger, valor, and determination. *Ashley's War* is a gripping combat narrative and a moving story of friendship—a book that will change the way readers think about war and the meaning of service.

Questions for Discussion

1. What were your thoughts about women serving in the military before you read *Ashley's War*?
2. Given that First Lieutenant Ashley White was in some ways discouraged to join the military by her father, what went into her decision to do so anyway?



3. What were the reasons for the “combat exclusion prohibition” for women formalized in 1994?
4. U.S. Special Operations Commander Eric Olson says of the war in Afghanistan that U.S. forces had “to learn to think [their] way through this fight.” What is an appropriate relationship between thinking and fighting, between intellect and force?
5. During the “100 hours of hell” assessment and selection phase, Rigby finds wisdom carved into a bathroom wall: “The mind is its own place. And itself can make a hell of heaven and a heaven of hell. Don’t quit.” What is the relationship between the mind and physical pain and suffering? How important is encouragement from others? And the experience of all those who have walked the same path before you?
6. What is the role of friendship in *Ashley’s War*?
7. Lieutenant Matt Pottinger, a journalist for the Wall Street Journal before becoming a Marine, combined “a reporter’s instincts” with his training. What might a journalist and a soldier have in common?
8. What’s significant about each of the three terms in Cultural Support Team?
9. Consider each of the women chosen to be part of the Cultural Support Team. What does each bring—in personality, skill, experience—to the group?
10. Cassie says at one point that “being female was a special burden in war.” What does she mean? Is this a necessary part of war or could changes be made?
11. Often the women of the CST are referred to—even by each other—as “guys” or “girls,” instead of women. Does this matter? How important is language in the push for opportunity?
12. Why is such extreme physical training so important to becoming and serving as a soldier in Special Ops?
13. What particular challenges face military couples?
14. Ashley worries at one point in the process that she is “a little bit too shy” to be a part of CST. Is extroversion an essential part of being a soldier? Of leading others? What are the essential elements of leadership?
15. There are many allusions to Hollywood films about war in the book. What role—positive or negative, for civilians or soldiers—do such films play in American culture?
16. Consider the role of the interpreters—“terps”—paired with soldiers and the CST. What are their particular challenges?

17. When Nadia, an interpreter from Orange County, CA, returns home from combat, she feels totally disconnected from the celebrations and normal lives of her friends. What awareness should be expected from civilians who have never been near combat when their country is at war?
18. What elements of Ashley's performance as a Special Ops enabler win her over to the combat-hardened male soldiers?
19. At Ashley's burial ceremony a woman brings her daughter so that she would know that "girls could be heroes, too." What is the nature of a hero? Who are other women that should be recognized as such?