

Tersea Fazio Interview

By Christina Brown Fisher

Nearly a decade after leaving the military, Teresa Fazio began writing her story of what it meant to be a young woman and to be a Marine Corps officer sent to war. While assigned as a communications officer in Iraq, she fell for the wrong man at the wrong time. Her memoir, *Fidelis*, provides an intimate portrayal of the battle Fazio faced as she grappled with the consequences while also trying to navigate her presence as a woman in a male-dominated military environment.

Fazio holds a BS in physics from MIT, an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars, and a Ph.D. in materials science from Columbia University. Her articles and essays have been published in *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Washington Post*, and *The War Horse*. *Fidelis*, her memoir, is available now at Potomac Books.

I spoke with Fazio about what it was like writing her memoir.

C. Brown Fisher: Teresa, when did you know that you wanted to write about your experience in Iraq?

T. Fazio: I didn't really start contemplating it until after I had defended my Ph.D. and was working my first job, which was at that point about seven years after I had deployed. It took me a long time to emotionally process everything that had happened in Iraq, on deployment, and with homecoming.

CBF: What was it about that seven years later that brought you to a point in which you felt comfortable not only to write about but publicly tell your story?

TF: I think it was just time—giving that emotional distance—but also feeling a bit more settled in my career. I had dealt with it emotionally a bit during grad school. But in terms of coming out with it, that actually evolved during the writing phase. At first, I was thinking I would pass off a little vignette as fiction. And I kept writing around certain things that had happened in Iraq, like dealing with the relationship I had there. And I kept thinking, well, no, I can't possibly write about that. Pretty soon it was all I could write about. So, I just made a timeline and wrote it as a straight memoir and it all poured out after I did that.

CBF: You mentioned graduate school. Did you have much writing experience?

TF: Not in terms of writing for public consumption. I had written as a kid and kept a journal, but I hadn't been writing articles or anything like that. I hadn't really been publishing anything. My degrees are in science.

CBF: Then how did you work on the craft of writing the story and equipping yourself with the appropriate skills needed to write a memoir?

TF: At first it was just really casual, online Gotham Writers Workshop classes. And then one day I stumbled across... a *New York Times* article about the NYU Veterans Writing Workshop. And through that workshop and a couple of other ones, *Voices from War* and *Words After War* ... I was going to like three veterans' writing workshops a week. Ironically, I didn't discover the Columbia [University] one until much later. I had made a friend online at the Gotham Writers Workshop class,



and she was at Bennington [College] for a low-residency MFA. That's how I got interested in Bennington, and I went there to earn my MFA while working full time.

CBF: When you participated in those veteran writing workshops, can you describe the impact that it had not just, learning certain skills that you would need to be a writer, but also how did it help inform your voice, empower your voice?

TF: It's interesting because going into my first veterans writing workshop, I was terrified because, you know, you're a veteran, and fellow vets will call you out on your bullshit.

CBF: Like no other group will.

TF: Yeah, exactly. I was really afraid of being judged, but everybody was cool and totally supportive. There's a lot of posturing when you're still in. I think a layer of that is maybe stripped off when you get out of the military. There was still, clearly, plenty of posturing and I guess myself included, but, you know, people were pretty quick to be real with each other. And actually, the instructors in that veterans writing workshop were all young, civilian MFA students themselves. I really enjoyed the instruction there. Those folks were cool in the cohort that I was with. That was great because they were supportive both in a literary sense and in showing me how to make my writing better sense. So that was really, really good for empowering my voice with some of the first writing instruction and writing coaching I had formally. And I really appreciated that.

CBF: Your memoir, *Teresa*, is a coming-of-age story. But *Fidelis* is also a story of what it meant for you to be a woman in the Marine Corps, and also a young woman who'd fallen in love while at war with a married man, another Marine Corps officer. How did you determine your structure? Which elements were going to appear and when, where, and how would they all connect?

TF: I do want to say that anytime I'm referenced as, "the story of being a woman in the Marine Corps," there are many ways to be a woman, full stop. So, clearly, my specific personal story is not every woman Marine's story. In terms of the structure, that was an evolution that took... years to figure out, what to leave in and what to cut, and how to sculpt the story. You're a writer, too, so you understand that.

Writing the memoir itself, from starting the first draft to putting the finishing touches on the final draft, took about seven or eight years from when I first started typing that into my keyboard. And so, over the first couple of years, (the first draft) was just all present tense. It was this extra-exhaustive, everything-is-in-there draft, and folks who read it were like, "You don't need to leave everything in there." So, I cut plenty from there. That's sort of the telling of the story, right? Figuring out what to leave in.

I wanted to make it a narrative about coming into my own agency, and coming into my own power, which, as you know, when you're extremely young, whether you're male or female, you don't have a whole lot of agency in the military. So, learning how to sort of claim that power as you get out, and the power to develop your own narrative, and then the gendered aspect of how in the military, [there] are certainly gendered power structures. And so how do different women navigate that? Because there are gendered power structures, what opportunities are women afforded to have agency over their own sexuality? The answer is, not very many, without negative consequences, whereas men are afforded agency over their own sexuality as a matter of course, as a matter of claiming male power. So, I guess I wanted to be able to illustrate that, too.

And the things I left in the book were expressly to illustrate that. I cut some things out of the book which didn't really serve that narrative.

CBF: Picking up on what you just said, talking about men having greater latitude to define who and what they are, define their sexuality, define their boundaries—there's a scene from officer candidate school that you describe. In it, a female warns you and the other female officer candidates that there are generally three categories in which a woman Marine is labeled. She's either a "bitch, dyke or ho," and then there's another scene that you describe, you're offended when a flight attendant singles you and another female Marine out, calling you both princesses. We see throughout your story, that you wrestle with the

impact of these experiences and the assumptions of what a woman in uniform can be. It seems to also shape how you led your troops, how you present yourself, either, feminine or not too feminine. Who do you hold responsible, for how you were made to feel in order to survive as a service member?

TF: I think it's a symptom of the wider culture. We're at the hinge point in human history now, where we're really breaking these gender stereotypes that have existed for centuries, millennia. I think one great thing that's come out of the past few decades is the acceptance of more of a spectrum of gender expression. The LGBTQ community has been huge in this.

I see this much more in the civilian world, in the wider culture, too, having people be able to express themselves in different ways and claim that power. And it's tough because the military is still a very patriarchal, gendered hierarchy—if you're male, you are the default, and, largely still, the default military member is male, at least certainly in the Marine Corps, which is maybe 91% male these days, instead of 93% male while I was in. But, no, I wouldn't point to that sergeant instructor as the one who affected me the most, in terms of how I viewed being a woman in the military, because generations of women have gotten the “bitch, dyke, ho,” speech.

It really becomes not just about gender, but about power. The way I was able to be around it, as a 23-year-old lieutenant, which you can only pull off if you're young, is being like everybody's kid sister. I have three younger brothers in real life who are great and whom I love. So I just treated my troops as if they were my teenage brothers. And that worked because I was used to having teenage brothers, but if I had stayed in the military and been a company commander, or stayed until I was a field grade officer, I would have had to take a different attitude, because you have to be more directive and more powerful in those roles. I think I would have come up against resistance in one place or another. Because, you know as a woman, if you were a traditionally gendered woman, femininity does not connote military power in that sort of gender binary.

CBF: How concerned were you, Teresa, about opening up regarding your relationship with the married officer, some using that as an example of why women and men shouldn't serve alongside one another? Certainly, shouldn't be with one another at war.

TF: That's a great question because it's definitely a concern. The thing is, no matter what people say, it's still going to happen one way or another, no matter what you do. I'm not trying to say we should all just let everybody sleep with each other all the time, but I think in terms of having a co-ed military, the good outweighs the bad, and we need to use the talents of every American able to serve. So, yes, it was definitely a concern. Nobody wants to be the poster child for military adultery.

At the same time, if knowing my story helps even one young person not make the same mistake, or makes them feel less alone because they're in a similar situation, it's worth it to share. I think owning your story and being able to tell it is the first step to growing up.

CBF: After your return from Iraq, it seemed as though the relationship with the married Marine officer, the affair, was the prism through which you saw your time. Do you still see it that way?

TF: I definitely see more things from my deployment than just that relationship. I think I learned a lot about leadership, by recognizing how conflict-averse I was back then, and how that probably didn't lead to some great leadership decisions. Those are ways in which I've had to grow over the past fifteen years or so. This [applies] for both men and women; when you're a second lieutenant, everybody knows more than you pretty much, unless you're prior enlisted. How do you navigate that when technically you're in charge, but the folks under you, really, in most cases, have better ideas? How do you navigate that, and listen to them while you're in a literal war zone? You can't afford to make mistakes. I think I learned a ton from that.

I'm still in touch with a few of my troops from that time frame, too. And it's been just so cool watching them grow and get college degrees. At least one of them is an officer now. Some other ones are out, and they're coaching other veterans and doing things or being kick-ass computer scientists, and that's just been really cool.



CBF: You open *Fidelis* with the story of your crossing into Iraq, from Kuwait, and the reader is just fully experiencing every aspect of your sleep-deprived, anxious and excited first moments of deployment and war. How did you know that was going to be the book's opening scene?

TF: It's funny, that was some of the earliest and first stuff I wrote about that deployment and it just stuck. That's been the opening prologue since the beginning. It was just a scene that was very visceral, and it sort of plunges the reader into it, and puts you right in the protagonist's head. One of my earlier memoir instructors was like, "start where the trouble begins."

CBF: You write in your book, "I wasn't sure how intensely one could fight in front of a computer monitor while the war continued outside the wire ... base life was telephone lines and plywood desks." As a communications officer, you and your team were the lifelines that kept comms up and running. *Fidelis* tells the story of a side of war that we don't often see. Far from frontline battles are the myriad of support operations that keep combat troops alive and yet, you detail the guilt you and your Marines often felt working inside the wire.

Teresa, was there ever a concern in writing the story that your experience of war wouldn't be heralded or valued because you and your unit weren't exposed to the same frequency or level of danger as other units?

TF: I wasn't concerned, mainly because I'm not in this to portray myself as some sort of hero or anything. There is a long line of folks outside of the combat arms who contribute to the war effort. And that's something to highlight too, about modern war. There are these enormous logistics efforts. There's this enormous military-industrial complex that the U.S. devotes to waging our conflicts. I think we need to get beyond the American Sniper-sort of Hollywood combat memoir, which so frequently is a white, male, company-grade officer, combat arms, veteran trope. There are so many more stories to be told. If you're looking for somebody going house to house, on patrol kicking down doors, and taking prisoners—no, that's not me. I think there are plenty more stories, certainly more than mine, out there too.

CBF: How did you settle on the title *Fidelis*?

TF: I don't know if Anuradha Bhagwati knows this—I really admire her memoir— my original title was also "Unbecoming." But by the time I was discussing my book with a publisher, hers had just come out. *Fidelis* is half of the Marine Corps motto, *Semper Fidelis*, and it means "faithful." In using that word, I was interrogating faithfulness in relationships, faithfulness to oneself, faithfulness to an ideal of being a Marine. Those are all things that I wrestled with during my deployment and after. I think that for this book, it was actually a better title than the original.

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