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Love My Rifle More Than You

Young and Female in the US Army

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with Michael E. Staub

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Extract

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QUEEN FOR A YEAR

> **Queen for a Year**: **1 a:** any American female stationed overseas in a predominantly male military environment. **b:** a female soldier who becomes stuck-up during her deployment due to an exponential increase in male attention—used disparagingly.

RIGHT INTO IT: Sex is key to any woman soldier's experiences in the American military. No one likes to acknowledge it, but there's a strange sexual allure to being a woman and a soldier.

I mean sex while in Iraq. At war. While deployed.

Take this one girl. I heard from reliable sources in Iraq she gave head to every guy in her unit. I mean, I heard it from guys who were there. Participants. No rumor. Truth. Guys who'd meet me and say: *Hey, Kayla, I'm told* all *MI females really like to . . .*

Don't get me wrong. I've never much minded the taste of it myself. I just had to wonder: Where was the pleasure in this for *her*? Was she nuts? And meanwhile, she's making my life tons

more difficult. Making it tougher for the rest of us females to get our work done without having guys insinuate that *blow jobs* was part of our Advanced Individual Training. It totally sucked, pun intended. It made it easy for guys over there to treat females as if we were less reliable. Which is enraging, since our skills as *soldiers* are what landed us in this war in the first place. Anyway, this particular girl got caught in the act, I guess you could say. More than once. Reprimanded for dereliction of duty. Almost comical when you really stop to think about it.

Or the twenty girls from this one unit who got sent home from Iraq pregnant. Knocked up. I heard a number of married guys were involved in this situation. Now that's a violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Single girls and single guys can do as they please. Technically.

A woman at war: you're automatically a desirable commodity, and a scarce one at that. We call it "Queen for a Year." Even the unattractive girls start to act stuck-up. It's impossible not to notice.

"Queen for a Year." You won't find the phrase in the dictionary or any compilation of military terms. But say it among soldiers, and they'll know immediately what you mean. That's what we've called American women at war since nurses traveled to Vietnam in the sixties.

There's also this "deployment scale" for hotness. Let me explain. On a scale of ten, say she's a five. You know—average looks, maybe a little mousy, nothing special. But okay. Not a girl who gets second glances in civilian life. But in the Army, while we're deployed? Easily an eight. One hot babe. On average *every* girl probably gets three extra points on a ten-point scale. Useful. After you're in-country for a few months, all the girls begin to look good—or at least *better.* It changes—how should I say this?—

the *dynamics* of being deployed.

You could get things easier, and you could get out of things easier. For a girl there were lots of little things you could do to make your load while deployed a whole lot lighter. You could use your femaleness to great advantage. You could do less work, get more assistance, and receive more special favors. Getting supplies? Working on the trucks? It could be a cinch—if you wanted it to be. It didn't take much. A little went a long way. Some of us worked it to the bone. Who says the life of the Army girl has to be cruel?

Lots of girls succumbed to temptation. The younger girls were the most susceptible. Many thrived and fed on the male attention they were getting for the first time in their lives.

I did my personal best to resist. So did my friends and the girls I respected. (That's why I respected them.) But many girls became full-fledged Queens for a Year. We saw it. And the guys talked.

The guys loved to talk. It didn't even especially matter what girls did or did not do. By the time it circled back to us (and in Iraq, everything that went around came around extra-fast), it might as well have been true.

"I watched her doing PT today. She was doing dips. She wants it!"

"I saw her in line for chow—she was wearing a tight brown T-shirt. She's looking for some action!"

Creepy.

And the locals? Even worse than Joes. At least some American guys have learned some subtlety about staring at our tits. They'd look out of the corner of their eyes. Or when we were looking away. Either Iraqi guys didn't care or didn't have the practice.

They just blatantly and openly stared at our tits. *All the time.*

Apparently Iraqis asked our guys if we were prostitutes. Employed by the U.S. military to service the troops in the same way the Russian army managed sex for its soldiers in Kosovo. I didn't want *anyone* to think we were the U.S. equivalent of that!

None of this means that life in the Army while deployed to a combat zone has to be celibate. "What goes TDY stays TDY." It's a longstanding military tradition. License to do as we please while on "temporary duty"—that is, while away from our permanent post. And it stays TDY when we return home.

Sex is not specifically prohibited for deployed soldiers. It's just *implied* that it is not allowed. Yet the PX in Iraq sells condoms. The general attitude is: "Don't get caught." The one rule is: "Be discreet." Probably most of the single girls do it. Most of the single guys, too, if they ever get the chance. It becomes a simple matter of supply and demand.

And even though it's not okay, it's true—if a girl was indiscreet, if she got caught, or people knew, everyone lost respect for her. Like she was some slut. It was different, of course, for the guys. Somehow everyone got it that getting laid was okay for the guys.

So get real. The Army is not a monastery. More like a fraternity. Or a massive frat party. With weapons. With girls there for the taking—at least some of the time.

The guys are there for the taking too. And we took. I took.

But mostly I chose to be a bitch. I was nowhere as young as most of the other girls over there. Nowhere as innocent—at all. I'd hung around guys almost all my life; my punk rock scene in high school was overwhelmingly male. I'd dealt with sex from a

young age. I'd been married.

In Iraq I felt I could deal with being Queen for a Year. But it still got to me. It still got me angry. Sometimes. I remember walking through the chow hall (once it was built) at the airfield was like running a gauntlet of eyes. Guys stared and stared and stared. Sometimes it felt like I was some fucking zoo animal. Guys hitting on us or saying inappropriate things—just *constant*.

Then sometimes I got in the mood. I'd enter the chow hall with a swing to my step. Check me out. Look. Don't touch. So occasionally it went to my head.

The girls joked, too. Some guys we met in Iraq were no prime specimens themselves. Funny nose, bad posture, bad teeth, whatever. But they also looked better. Always. So it worked both ways. Location, location, location. It played with all our minds.

It was like a separate bloodless war within the larger deadly one.

Let me tell you a story.

"Hey, Kayla! Show us your boobs!"

I was on a mountain near the Syrian border. At this time, I may well have been the most forward-deployed female soldier in Iraq. You could lose yourself in the view from up there, especially at dusk or dawn, when the sheer impact of the vista made your head spin.

I was alone. Alone with the guys, that is. For weeks.

They're frustrated. Horny. Talking openly about jerking off.

We sat in the blazing sun—*hot*—not doing much.

"Show us your tits, bitch!" Trash talk.

"No."

"C'mon, Kayla. Lift your T-shirt. For a second. Please! Let us see what you've got!"

"No."

I had no *principled* objection. I'd modeled nude for art classes in college. I had no qualms about showing my body.

Then the guys made what I considered their first real mistake. They started to ante up. Ten bucks. Twenty. Forty. Sixty-five. Eighty bucks. It went to eighty-seven dollars, and then a smart-ass threw in some M&M's he'd stashed.

They came to me with their proposition.

"C'mon, Kayla. This is hard-earned American money. Uncle Sam's almighty dollar. Plus M&M's. We know how much you like M&M's. Now show us your damn tits!"

"Fuck off, assholes!"

It was over. Because I might *remotely* have done it for free. I would *never* do it for money. What did these guys think I was? A whore?