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Kelly Flinn. *Proud To Be: My Life, the Air Force, the Controversy.* New York: Random House, 1997. 259 pp. $23.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-50109-8.

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Bring Me Men–Or an Equivalent Thereof

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Kelly Flinn was born to an Irish Catholic family, the youngest with four much older brothers and sisters. She grew up a proverbial tomboy, reveling in trucks, dirt, speed; oh, yes, definitely speed; and played hard and strong with boys from the beginning. She dreaded the onset of puberty with its inevitable physical changes, and prayed her menstrual periods would never start, thus condemning her to a life of femaleness complete with all its undesirable expectations and restrictions.

Puberty came, however, as it tends to do, but Kelly remained an exceedingly active girl, playing as many sports as she could while waiting for life to happen. She was basically an outsider, having no interest in typically "girl" pursuits, and when her father read about Space Camp she jumped at the chance to go. Already fascinated with flying from the hours spent watching planes land and take off with her mother as her father came and went for his job, Space Camp was the crowning event of her young life. She made the decision right there and then to fly, and with luck, as an astronaut; if not that, airplanes. She never wavered from this dream.

This meant the Air Force Academy (tellingly, she notes that while she realized the Navy had women pilots, they had a reputation for treating women badly), and she was ecstatic to obtain a coveted, and extremely competitive, slot to attend. She would become a pilot, thus fulfilling her lifetime dream and ambitions.

When Flinn entered the Academy she was notably socially inexperienced and lacking in knowledge of typical male-female interactions; she was simply excited to have begun at last to fulfill her dreams to fly. She wanted to fly the fast, sexy fighters she had almost worshiped for so long.

Flinn soon found herself less than ecstatic when she began to experience the extreme misogyny and abusive treatment her male counterparts were quick to mete out. Oddly, she does not seem to have recognized this as a chronic pattern of abuse, nor as part of an overwhelmingly destructive culture within the Academy.

Her shock and anger at being sexually assaulted in her room, and the reactions of her sexually promiscuous roommate (who was also sexually assaulted, but appears to have considered the event a joke) as well as the small numbers of people she told about the incident, would be traumatic. When she finally sought help from a woman counselor she was even further victimized and traumatized by a counselor who indicated that Flinn must have been drunk and invited the assault. The counselor then threatened to advise the Academy of Flinn's underage drinking if there should be a repetition. Flinn had been dining with her parents, and consumed a single glass of wine. There were no witnesses, so friends advised her not to press charges or even to report what had happened. The counselor not only failed to deal with Flinn's problem, she failed to diagnose the glaringly obvious symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress, a standard reaction of sexual assault victims. This stunning failure to meet even minimal levels of professionalism would be a precursor for events to com.

>From the symptoms she describes, Flinn was suffering from untreated Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and she grew increasingly upset. Flinn's coping skills were never well developed, and her lack of worldly knowledge made her even less equipped to deal with the constant harassment and unblinking hatred and resentment she continually faced. She would eventually need to literally force herself not to quit.

Flinn discusses the utter failure of both the Academy and its cadets to incorporate the spirit of the rules and regulations rather than instilling and enforcing the letter of the law in a blind, mindless adherence to an honor code that is anything but honorable. Cadets are accused of violations, and often found guilty in spite of a total lack of evidence and they are consequently dismissed, their fu-

tures in the Air Force destroyed on nothing more than hearsay, possibly from a vicious or vindictive source. At the same time conduct that would raise eyebrows in the civilian world is tolerated, and apparently encouraged. Appalling levels of alcohol abuse, sexual assaults, and sexual promiscuity are routine. There is apparently no discipline maintained in the dorms. She goes on at length to describe in excruciating detail the lack of appropriate leadership and conduct of seniors at the Academy. The leadership is seemingly oblivious to the horrors in which the Academy is mired. One example Flinn recounts is an investigation by the Office of Special Investigations, which was called in after the class of l993 graduated only 92 women of the nearly 200 that started out in 1984 (compared to the 870 men out of some 1,200). The investigation discovered extraordinarily high levels of sexual assaults, including rapes and sexual harassment, most of which had never been reported. At least one of the women was threatened with death if she revealed anything.

When the results were in, the leadership was amazed and punishment was meted out. However, both men and women were punished equally, the men for sexual harassment and indecent exposure, the women for underage drinking. No rape or sexual assault cases were investigated or pursued.

Another failure in leadership is illustrated by the way the Academy chose to deal with the selection of cadets for pilot training. Flinn had never really thought about the fact that very few cadets actually were selected for this, and the majority of graduates did not fly at all, much less the fighters and jets the cadets desired with an all-consuming passion. So, when the realization hit, it was a shock. When it came time for her class to go through the selection process, she still had hopes of being a selectee; her grades and scores were high enough to secure her place among the best. She hoped to at least go through the training, although she recognized the fact that women were barred from flying combat aircraft, as she thought the law would soon be changed and she wanted to be trained. Flinn made the cut for pilot training, but not for fighters. She was told they were not going to waste a slot on a woman who would be unable to utilize it. She says, "This was the first time in my life that my gender had ever held me back. It was a shock to my sense of self and my place in the world" (p. 75).

Eventually, Flinn graduated from the Academy, and entered pilot training. Here she encountered more of the same inexplicable hatred and resentment, as well as mindless misogyny and objectification of women as sexual targets. Once again the men broke all the rules with no consequences, while the women were held to puritanical, rigid standards and expectations, all the while being subjected to harassment and resentment.

When it was time to pick aircraft and flying slots, Flinn unwittingly stepped into another world of male exclusion and resentment. She picked the B-52 bomber and was the first woman ever to do so. She now underwent the real destruction of her "service reputation," a generalized reputation of an individual's performance, character and military capabilities. Experiencing no more and no less difficulty in learning to fly, she found a rumor had begun which spread from the U.S. to Europe that she was being given special treatment because the Air Force wanted her to succeed as their Poster Child "First." The rumor was unfounded; however, it persisted and returned to haunt her later.

For women in the military, being the first is often subject to exploitation by the service. It was no different for Kelly Flinn. The media descended upon this attractive, young, photogenic blonde bomber pilot in hordes, orchestrated and encouraged by an Air Force PR machine that was delighted to demonstrate its political correctness. Flinn did, indeed, receive special treatment for she was continually being hauled out of class for photo opportunities and interviews which prevented her from completing her duties and in general guaranteed that she would be subject to extremes of resentment and hatred. She did not want this; Flinn wanted simply to be another bomber pilot and to be accepted within the community as such.

The Air Force wasn't going to pass up such an opportunity for publicity, however, nor was the media going to overlook such a wonderful wealth of story material. As Flinn describes it, the media began to shape an image of a veritable model of activist feminism, a woman who had fought repeatedly and vigorously against the "System" in order to get where she wanted to be. This was far from the truth. Flinn states, "I had never considered myself a feminist. I'd always thought that all the shouting and screaming [*sic*] about women's rights actually got in the way of women's advancement" (p. 123).

Unfortunately, after her training was finally completed, Flinn's first duty station was Minot, North Dakota. North Dakota in general and Minot in particular came as yet another distinct shock. The base boasted few amenities, and the town even fewer. Morale was rock bottom, there were virtually no recreational facilities, and even those were out of reach for most enlisted personnel, and the primary off-duty activities were ex-

tremes of heavy drinking and serial adultery, often between enlisted and officer personnel and their spouses.

It was under these circumstances that one night in a drunken stupor (on both sides) Flinn had sex with an enlisted man, who then boasted all over the base of his "conquest." At the time, Flinn did not realize the rules had changed. While fraternization had always been technically against regulations across all branches of the service, it had been ignored. Not anymore and not for Flinn, although fraternization and adultery were both common among the rest of the military. While no official response occurred to blacken Flinn's name, one particularly vicious and manipulative officer heard of the episode and remembered it. He would later embroider the story substantially and use it against Flinn in the notorious downfall of the first woman bomber pilot.

Here, in the depressing, unbearably lonely reaches of North Dakota, basically friendless and certainly unhappy, Flinn met Marc Zigo. He introduced himself to her as a former professional soccer player with whom she would be playing on the local team, and he later told her he was separated from his wife, Gayla, an enlisted woman.

What ensued was to become fodder for the media for many months, and Kelly Flinn would lose any semblance of a normal life or privacy in the most intimate details of her personal self. This still-naive and lonely woman would fall in love with Zigo and have an affair, fully convinced that he was telling her the truth and was separated. Also unbeknownst to Flinn, Zigo is a sociopathic and congenital liar, with all the stereotypical behaviors and manipulative skills of such persons. He was physically, emotionally, and psychologically abusive, and Flinn was totally unequipped to deal with this. Even highly skilled mental health professionals are often fooled by sociopaths, and the narcissistic behavior they exhibit is extraordinarily effective in manipulating and controlling their victims. Flinn was a perfect victim.

The media feeding frenzy that ensued once the Air Force decided to make an issue of Flinn's indiscretion was horrendous. The Air Force misconduct that occurred during the lengthy, difficult time was inexcusable. The story is filled with blatant examples of official malfeasance, brutal indifference to the welfare of one of its own, blind refusal to deal with the truth, and an obvious goal of scapegoating Kelly Flinn to get rid of her. They succeeded. In the end, to avoid a Court Martial, Kelly Flinn was forced to resign, a figure of public ridicule and an object for exploitation by those who want women out of the military at all costs.

This book is hard to read, and for the naive, even harder to believe as incident after incident of official misconduct, overt peer hatred, serious deliberate judicial misconduct, and destruction of a human life unfolds. No one who would know the realities of what military women can still be forced to endure should fail to read this book. Certainly, anyone who believes he or she knows all about the notorious Kelly Flinn case should read the other side of the story.

The military, as depicted in this book, remains in too many instances a bastion of male dominance and resentment, even hatred, for what is viewed as female incursions into traditional male territory. While legal and governmental edicts have produced some changes, in many cases the misogyny has merely gone underground or become more subtle. However, there is no dearth of evidence that extreme, overt actions and behaviors are quite openly practiced, with the leadership that should be preventing it condoning it, participating in it, or oblivious to it.

Proud To Be is riveting. This reviewer has personally experienced much of the same sort of injustice and official denial in a lengthy military career, and other women have published accounts of their own analogous experiences.[1]

There are, however, some things that this reviewer finds odd. Flinn, by her own account, was, and in many ways continues to be, extraordinarily naive. As she continues her narrative, there is little evidence of learning the hard lessons of existing in a hostile male environment. In the grossly excessive use of alcohol she finds around her she seems a willing participant, even though it repeatedly brings her great trouble. While her experience in romantic entanglements seems limited, it demonstrates remarkably poor judgment, and she ignores dire warnings of serious consequences if she continues to engage in inappropriate relationships, including that with Zigo.

The affair with Zigo does have all the earmarks of a classic case of domestic abuse with emotional, mental, psychological abuse and violence, and a defense attorney might have found some use in the "battered woman defense." The obviously slanted and abusive investigation surrounding what was undoubtedly going to be a "kangaroo court" with a pre-determined outcome added additional emotional and psychological stress.

The fact is that Flinn's entire time in the military, with numerous cases of abuse of authority, poor leadership, and just plain failure of military standards of conduct;

her sexual assault that was not only never treated, but actively worsened by the unprofessional conduct of the counselor from whom she sought help; and the steady flow of negative experiences all conspired to produce an emotional wreck. Her narrative would seem to support this supposition. Flinn recounts her feelings as the investigation into the Zigo affair continued, and his abuse of her also continued, as she continued to live with him in spite of orders not to. She admits to extreme humiliation, fear, and total disillusionment.

Flinn was discharged at midnight, May 28, l997, and *Proud To Be* was released by her publisher that same year. It normally takes two years to publish a book, and that does not include the time it takes to write it. The book is strangely objective and distanced considering the circumstances.

But Flinn's letter of resignation to the Secretary of the Air Force is in the appendix. In it, in spite of all she had endured, and was continuing to endure, Flinn begged to be given another chance to remain in the Air Force. This seems to be a rather unusual desire for someone so shabbily treated throughout the entire period of her short and spectacular career.

There is, to this reviewer, an unsettling effect of reading the narratives of two people so intertwined they are virtually inseparable. On the one hand, Flinn is a repeatedly self-described unworldly and naive girl-child, and on the other hand, the narrative itself shows deep, almost professional-level psychological insight into behaviors and actions. While Flinn does credit an unusual number of people with helping her write the book, the overall effect is a powerful indicator that she herself did not actually write it so much as string together painful anecdotes while others pulled them together into a finished book. It is highly unlikely that someone so damaged by the events of that short but intense period from the Air Force Academy through her forcible discharge could possibly deal with the emotional and psychological fall-out and produce such a work. A smoother, cohesive voice might conceivably improve the book for use academically, as would some indication that Flinn was at least conversant with other, similar cases.

In spite of the uneasiness the reader might experience from these factors, the book is a genuinely valuable addition to the slowly accumulating accounts of women who run afoul of official and unofficial military misogyny. The media accounts of the Zigo affair certainly do not do justice to the real story, nor do most of them remark on the sheer absurdity of selecting one female officer to ruin for adultery in a military so plagued by the practice that many officers reacted with disbelief and incredulity when they heard about the case.

Although it is probably not meant to serve as such, *Proud To Be* is also an excellently articulated portrait of an abused woman in a situation so overwhelmingly abusive external to the central abuse of Marc Zigo that readers cannot fail to see how the dynamics work and intertwine. This is a valuable aspect of Kelly Flinn's story, and the book could be useful in women's studies courses, or courses on abuse.

Note

[1]. This reviewer's *Warriors Without Weapons: The Victimization of Military Women*; Missy Cummings, *Hornets Nest*; Carol Barkelow, *In The Men's House.* Moreover, details concerning Tailhook events have been exposed in a variety of works and official investigative documents which came to light when Lt. Paula Coughlin decided to come forward are examples of similar works exposing some women's' stories.

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