New book looks at war through soldiers’ eyes

BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

“Making War at Fort Hood: Life And Uncertainty In A Military Community” is by Kenneth T. MacLeish. The book is published by Princeton University Press; 265 pages, $29.95.

“My job is to heal as I transition back to duty or continue serving the Nation as a veteran in my community,” a U.S. Army Medical Department publication declares. “This is not a status, but a mission. I will succeed in this mission because I Am A Warrior And I Am Army Strong.”

Most of the servicemen and women at Fort Hood, Texas, one of the largest military installations in the world, are in transition. They have returned from one or more tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan or are about to be sent there.

Dark, depressing account
In “Making War At Fort Hood,” Kenneth MacLeish, as assistant professor of Medicine, Health and Society, draws on interviews with them and members of their families in an ethnographic exploration of the impact of deployment on their everyday lives.

The term “vulnerability,” he suggests, best captures their condition. Spreading outward from the soldier to the individuals and institutions connected to him (or her), vulnerability “is a sort of productive contamination that is less a strain on or disruption of attachment than it is the stuff of attachment itself.”

MacLeish’s account is dark and depressing. The author understands the risks of reading everything “as meaning-laden traces of war.”

Emotions suppressed
He acknowledges that there is “abundant good feeling at Fort Hood” and that many readjustments to home and family life “are seamless, or close to it.” These stories, however, do not make their way into “Making War at Fort Hood.”

Instead, MacLeish documents, often poignantly, the difficulties soldiers have in making sense of their experiences and in moving on. The Army, he indicates, inculcates and cultivates “suspicion toward claims of non-visible injury,” which it tends to equate with “deception and moral failing.”

Designed to be “exercises in solidarity and affection,” he writes, “manifests” (departure and return events, usually held in gymnasium on the post) often underscore “pain, loss, grief, misrecognition, and the tight control and suppression of emotions.”

Even love, according to MacLeish, yokes soldiers “to a precarious state.”

Racism overlooked
Surprisingly, MacLeish devotes relatively little attention to some of the conflicts of life in the armed services. He claims that racial differences “are inevitably entangled in the unequal distribution of harm, exposure, responsibility, and authority – in the Army as in so many other settings.”
Except for a single paragraph in which he describes a fight between a racist and another soldier, however, he does not elaborate.

Nor does MacLeish investigate why the soldiers at Fort Hood joined the Army—and what they think they may have gained from the experience. It seems clear that he is appalled by the costs exacted by war in general—and by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular.

**Bigger questions**
When MacLeish’s plumber declares that contractors in these countries have sold their souls and that America is corrupt, he tells us that he was “too nervous, too wary of splitting hairs” to point out “what seemed like a bigger and messier complicity.

Weren’t we all here because of war, one way or the other? Was there even any question of turning down blood money or not ending up with some of it in your own pocket?”

“Being subject to war’s facts of life makes them normal,” MacLeish concludes, “but it doesn’t make them easier.” Fair enough. But you have to wonder how much of the vulnerability he describes is endemic to 21st-century wars. And about what we can do to address the disturbing consequences he has described.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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