

ROBERT J. THOMPSON
Independent Scholar

Caroline Paige, *True Colours: My Life as the First Openly Transgender Officer in the British Armed Forces*. London: Biteback Publishing, 2017. Index, Photographs, pp. 207. ISBN: 978-178-590-132-4. Hardback. Price £20.00.

Between the middle of December 2015 and the end of January 2016, the Museum of Liverpool exhibited *Dry Your Eyes Princess*, a series of large-scale portraits by the photographer Stephen King. The exhibition captured the ‘pinnacle moments’ of 12 veterans of the British Armed Forces all of whom are trans*, an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. One of those images depicts Caroline Paige, the first trans* officer to have served openly in the British Armed Forces. In the image, Paige stands in a field of crops under a rolling sky, holding her decorated Royal Air Force No.1 jacket at arms’ length. It is a photograph that neatly sums up the content of *True Colours*, and Paige’s career, specifically her self-imposed solitude and her later success in challenging the Royal Air Force’s reluctance to acknowledge gender diversity. Given that we know very little about institutional responses to trans* personnel, *True Colours* provides a crucially important account of one woman’s personal battle for recognition and acceptance.

Historically, and as work by Woodward and Winter has demonstrated, diversity and gender difference has always been problematised by the British Armed Forces. Despite the optimism of one senior official remarking on the case of Major Joanne Rushton in 1998, that the Army ‘does not have a policy on transsexuals as such because we are an equal-opportunities employer’, possessing a trans* identity in the Armed Forces was usually conflated with same-sex desire and could result in a period of detention and discharge under the crime of indecency, the catch-all term for same-sex activity. In 1999, the ban was lifted on open service in the British Armed Forces for lesbian, gay and bisexual personnel. However, trans* people remained conspicuously absent from the new policy. This changed in 2007 with the release of a DIN, or Defence Information Notice, which applied to all three services. Prior to this, trans* personnel were treated on a case-by-case basis, which meant that responses were hugely inconsistent.

REVIEWS

True Colours covers the period before and after this DIN from the viewpoint of a highly skilled and heavily decorated helicopter navigator. The book is organised chronologically, beginning with Paige's childhood and ending with her most recent work as a trainer and an ambassador. Paige is an adept storyteller who effortlessly knits together operational detail from missions in Iraq and Afghanistan with deeply personal reflections about her life before and after her decision to live openly as herself. In this respect, it is a book that will have a wide appeal to both historians and members of the general public. Paige was exceptionally lucky that she received the support of her medical officer and was able to live and work as her preferred gender before the official formulation of a policy. As my ongoing work with trans*veterans demonstrates, the vast majority of personnel whose gender identity was either declared or discovered did not receive the same response. This unique perspective is one of the great strengths of *True Colours*. As a piece of historical reconstruction, it has immense utility in documenting the machinations of senior officers and peers in a system that remains very much closed off to outsiders.

I read *True Colours* in almost one sitting. It is absorbing, informative and tremendously moving. In the absence of sustained academic scholarship on the presence of trans* personnel in the military nationally and internationally, this is a courageous and timely contribution which will undoubtedly stimulate academic debate and research across a number of disciplines.

EMMA VICKERS
Liverpool John Moores University