



*The 'Stan* by Kevin Knodell and David Axe.

Illus. Blue Delliquanti. Annapolis, MD: Dead Reckoning, 2018. Pp. 128. ISBN 978-1-68247-098-5.

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Images of memories  
Imprinted on my mind  
The boy they knew before  
Is what they'll never find.<sup>1</sup>

Every picture tells a story, but whose? In American war comics, the answer was once predictable: Sergeant Rock's<sup>2</sup> perspective long sufficed. No longer. Today's military comics exhibit much greater diversity.<sup>3</sup> A case in point is *The 'Stan*, one of the inaugural run of comic books published by Dead Reckoning, the new graphic novel imprint of the Naval Institute Press, which seeks "to make military themed comics a vibrant genre again and to introduce a whole new generation of graphic novel readers to the power of these stories."<sup>4</sup>

*The 'Stan* collects seventeen stories<sup>5</sup> from the first decade of the ongoing war in Afghanistan. According to the book's foreword, it "showcases the ways ... such a long war can affect the people fighting it ... [and] just trying to live through it." The goal is to paint a "broader picture of the war," based on the "myriad truths of those who have ... been there."

The book features artist Blue Delliquanti's striking graphic interpretations of David Axe and Kevin Knodell's war reporting that appeared originally on Axe's website, *War is Boring*. Art and text both convey the slow but inexorable transformation of the idealism of the men and women who served in the Afghan War into something different. Like the conflict they depict, the graphics increasingly look washed out and worn. The words grow uncertain. Many unanswered questions crystalize. Words and pictures collide, and what had seemed simple grows complicated. *The 'Stan* does not proselytize. It provokes, forcing readers to contemplate the whole of America's experience in Afghanistan: gains, losses, and lack of a clear resolution.

In "Afraid of Everything," the first story in *The 'Stan*, the American incursion into Afghanistan seems to offer hope to many who had suffered through the long Soviet occupation (1979-89). This is reflected in Delliquanti's depiction of the story's protagonist, Abdul Salam Zaeef, who appears to have emerged from a Saturday morning cartoon in another time and place. His story, however, is far from cartoonish. He joined the Mujahideen at age fifteen. Many Afghans "were dancing to the

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1. Alex Cockers, "Bad Dreams."

2. See *Wikipedia*, s.v., "Sgt. Rock."

3. See, e.g., Tom King, *The Sheriff of Babylon*, illus. Mitch Gerads (NY: Vertigo Comics, 2018), and Maximilian Uriarte, *The White Donkey: Terminal Lance* (NY: Little, Brown, 2016). Uriarte's popular comic strip, *Terminal Lance*, is published by the *Marine Corps Times*.

4. Press release: "Anchors Aweigh! Naval Institute Press Launches New Graphic Novel Imprint"; see also Calvin Reid, "Naval Institute Press Navigates to Graphic Novels," *Publishers Weekly* (2 Mar. 2018).

5. N.b., table of contents - [www.miwsr.com/rd/1901.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1901.htm).

drum of the Americans,” he reflects. They “failed to understand what the future held for them”—poverty, unemployment, lawlessness, and bloodshed. America’s intervention in Afghanistan, Zaeef suggests, represents the “biggest mistake.”

Some voices in *The ’Stan* echo Zaeef’s perspective. In “Winning,” US Army S. Sgt. Ryan Nupen laments America’s impact in Afghanistan: “all we did was breed another generation of angry, parentless, brotherless kids.”

Others stress opportunities to make a difference, however small. In “From Hooters Waitress to Soldier,” Spec. Alison Parton’s story shows that women in fact served as combatants throughout “the entire war.” But Parton also worked to win hearts and minds. As a human intelligence collector in the Army, she participated in a “slow, nuanced, methodical process [of] building trust,” and not doing “that Jack Bauer shit.” A vegetarian, Parton once ate goat’s flesh, simply because a village elder wanted to see if she would. This is the sort of uncommon and unglamorous glimpse *The ’Stan* gives into the “reality for those who have served.”

In “Left Behind,” readers meet Sami Kazikhani, an Afghan interpreter for the US Marine Corps. His heartbreaking tale ends with the birth his daughter, Roxanne, in a Turkish refugee camp, entering the world as a “stateless person.”

The collection concludes with “War and Fireworks,” a story highlighting the irony of Americans celebrating their freedom by “giving the people who fought for it flashbacks.” At home and abroad, the country’s longest war continues to “stretch on longer.” The personal stories illustrated in *The ’Stan* movingly convey the costs for all involved.