

# SNAPSHOTS SENT HOME

FROM AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ, UKRAINE—A MEMOIR

Like many post-9/11 combat veterans, JT Blatty struggled to regain her sense of purpose in the first years returning home from Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2018, a chance encounter brought her to Ukraine, drawn in by the familiarity of war and those who serve in wars. Over five years, JT captured the oral history and portraits of a tribe of revolutionaries, the Donbas volunteer soldiers. As she embedded with them on the front line in bunkers and forests, and in Kyiv flats, JT's story began to blend with theirs in a universal bond of combat veterans. The love of a soldier and an entire veteran community compelled her to stay as a new war began.

Excerpt from *Snapshots Sent Home*:

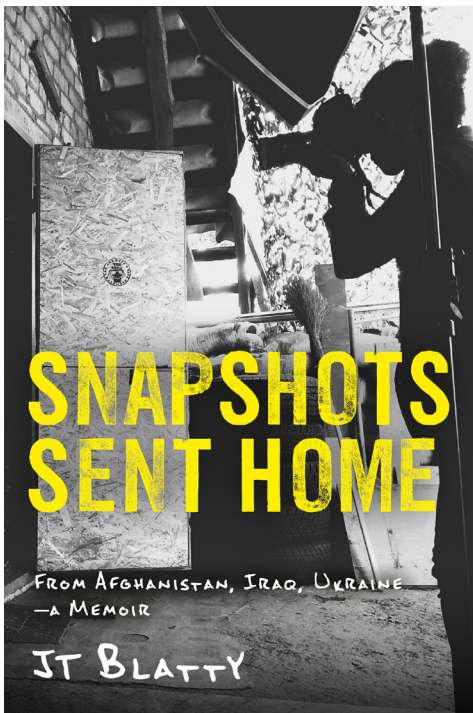
*I watch Valkyrie from the backseat of the camouflaged vehicle we're riding in, my knees pressed against a Soviet-era rifle, wooden stock and barrel, that's stuffed into the back of Sergei's seat. ... I'm on a high, lost in translation with a Russian and a Ukrainian, neither of whom speak English. ... Valkyrie keeps switching the music; she never lets a song end. She passes a bottle of Stella back to me for another sip. ... Earlier, at a gas station restaurant, she ripped her unit's Velcro patch from her shoulder sleeve and stuffed it into her pocket, a blatant and conscious decision that she's going to drink and break the rules tonight.*

*Sergei, Valkyrie's driver and comrade, keeps singing her real name, "Yuuuuuuliya," half scolding and half in adoration, a "What are you doing now, crazy one?" type of voice, as she switches to yet another song. I laugh and look at Dylan; he turns to me, smiling, because she's wild, angry, full of fire. She hides the beer at her feet as we slow down at another checkpoint to exit Toretsk, the frontline town where her unit is based, the city center home to a war-destroyed, former town hall less than two kilometers from the front line. We drive through, slow down and brake again as we curve around a series of ditches and craters created by the war's mortars and artillery shelling. As we pick up speed again, she jacks the music back up, finds another song on her phone, lights another cigarette, and shakes her long hair loose. The headlights of a car driving in the opposite direction briefly accent the wavy amber of what looks more like the mane of a lion in the night.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**JT BLATTY** graduated from the US Military Academy West Point in 2000 and served six years as an active duty US Army officer, deploying with the first troops into Afghanistan following 9/11 and again into Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. After completing her US military service, JT pursued photography and writing as a career. Her work has been published in numerous national and regional publications. She received a 2021-2022 Ukraine Fulbright scholarship to finish her memoir *Snapshots Sent Home*, while continuing her documentary photojournalism in the Donbas.



**FEBRUARY 20, 2024**

Memoir (Military)

6" x 9" • 176 pages • Case Qty 40

978-1-934617-81-6 PB \$21.95

978-1-934617-82-3 ebk \$12.99

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