

## A COMING OF AGE

WILLIAM T. ELIASON

Review of *Between Two Shades of Blue*

By Mark Clodfelter, Air University Press, 2022, 268 pp

Whether you are a graduate of a military academy, especially the US Air Force Academy (USAFA), or a fan of the University of North Carolina (UNC), or just someone who enjoys imagining someone else's life for a time, you will find Mark Clodfelter's freshman novel an enlightening experience. A history and strategy professor and retired Air Force officer with top-tier Air Force history and Joint professional military education credentials, Clodfelter has taken aim at capturing a very specific period of time in the late 1970s at both institutions and hit the mark in a most engaging, entertaining, and true-to-life way. *Between Two Shades of Blue* is a most impressive novel and an especially adventurous effort for both author and publisher, Air University Press, which is not noted for publishing fiction. Here I believe they have teamed up to outstanding effect.

I likely first met Clodfelter at the Air Force Academy sometime in his senior year. At that time, he was a part of an all-male upper class of cadets, and I was a doolie (Academy slang for freshman cadets). I say likely as I don't remember him from that period, but we were both there, and his writing in this book captures that time so well. My class, USAFA 1980, was working through the double challenge of being the first class with women included and the constant pressure of any military academy's first year. Without the privileges I had in high school and not particularly a fan of college basketball at the time, I approached Mark's novel with my personal perceptions of that time and place, which I thought must have been far different from his. While the angle was different, the scene he depicts is spot on. The arrival of women to the military academies was not without controversy both inside and outside the military. The very public opinions in our nation at the time of our Bicentennial that favored excluding

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women from combat and by extension the service academies had not been silenced by executive and congressional actions in those pre-social media days.

The class of 1980 collectively bore the brunt of the upper-class training and the constantly changing organization of the way women were to be housed. Initially, women were segregated in an isolated section of one of the dormitories and trained by Air Training Officers who were junior female officers, while their male classmates were trained by the cadets. An active effort to turn the men of my class against the women was alive and only partially suppressed through the course of that year. The effects would linger for years and, for some, would manifest into what we today recognize as PTSD. But not every member of these four classes was against the admission of women. Eventually the military itself would slowly adapt to accept the value of anyone who had the capability and persistence to perform the mission, even in combat. But that year, from the summer of 1976 to June Week of 1977, was unlike any other before or since at our military academies.

As a fictional member of the class of 1977, Cadet Paul Glattan, Clodfelter's protagonist, worked his way through four years of strict military life in the immediate post-combat-in-Vietnam period, a time when it was not uncommon for cadets visiting off-campus in uniform to be treated unkindly by passing motorists. Only senior cadets had their own cars, and freshmen had to wear uniforms while on a pass to visit Colorado Springs. Life on campus for cadets was not much easier for all the reasons one can expect at a service academy. Glattan hails from North Carolina and has a passion for Tarheel basketball and all things military history. His basic training experience is as harsh as any I remember and in fact more so as he becomes hospitalized due to injuries that went untreated. His near-death experience is due in part to upperclassmen enforcing the "tough it out" Spartan ethic of these environments—some would say all the more so because of the youthful cadets enforcing the standards of behavior. Glatten works through the "fourth class system," leveraging his significant knowledge of aviation greats and his passion for classical music—which he experiences in the cadet library, one of the two sanctuaries for doolies on campus, the other being the Chapel. It is important to note that Clodfelter himself was a history major at USAFA and to this day has an unbridled passion for UNC sports.

The progress of the story includes a number of very real experiences with love and loss in Glattan's life that will be familiar to both military academy graduates and civilians alike, but each is heightened by the constant requirement to return to the confines of the campus at the foot of the Front Range of the Rockies. Glattan wonders if his personality has been altered by his military experience as his relationships with young women he meets are at times less than successful due to his cold attitude. Many a cadet has loved and lost due to that life, sometimes just from the sight of a skinhead version of that high school Big Man on Campus returning home on Thanksgiving leave that doolie year. Sometimes the uniform isn't enough, especially in the late 1970s lingering antimilitary period, a time far removed from today's "Thank you for your service" responses to learning about one's time in the military.

An even darker subplot appears and involves Glattan's history professor, a passed over US Air Force lieutenant colonel who, as an intelligence officer, was exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Chadwick is a man whom the cadet greatly admires; moreover, Glattan has fallen in love with his daughter. How Chadwick deals with his worsening health and performance of his duties as one of the toughest instructors at the Academy—wielding a green-inked pen vice a red one on cadet papers in order to prevent any psychological trauma—is central to a good portion of the book.

Clodfelter skillfully uses his history chops and highly developed storytelling abilities to bring the reader into the very real and often raw day-to-day experience of a young man navigating this highly stressed life. His treatment of Glattan and his engineering roommate is particularly on target and no doubt timeless for anyone who lived in a dorm for their entire college experience as military academy students do. Using language as cadets would and scenes dealing with issues that continue to plague military life today, such as suicide, caused the publisher to place a disclaimer in the front matter as a warning to the reader.

What really helps the reader keep from being overwhelmed by this difficult coming-of-age story is the other “shade of blue” that the North Carolina subplot offers. Glattan gets the opportunity of a lifetime when he is able to return to his hometown there during his senior year spring break. He visits with friends and family—both have their own colorful parts to play in the cadet's backstory—and lucks into being on the UNC campus as the Tarheels are playing in the NCAA tournament, which has today become March Madness.

According to the supporting quotes on the back cover and my Google research of the game that year between UNC and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the author successfully recreates that game, the experience on the UNC campus in celebration, and probably the most exciting day of Glattan's life up to that point. We all should have been so fortunate at that age. But he eventually has to return to the difficult trials of the final weeks of his cadet life leading to graduation. Readers will find this part of the novel especially page-turning, as Clodfelter turns up the drama all around this well-described and interlocked cast of characters, one that includes the Academy itself, as it is ever present in each cadet's mind while there and long afterwards.

Life is said to be made of circles where we are often caused to confront our past. History may not repeat, but I agree that it rhymes. It does so because of the things we experience with others, both friends and family as well as all the other characters who appear in our stories. Lieutenant Colonel Clodfelter capped his two careers, military and civilian, teaching first at the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies at Maxwell Air Force Base, where I was one of his students, and later at the National War College on the campus of the National Defense University (NDU), where we served together and have since collaborated in publishing some of his finest works. Students of the Vietnam War and leadership in combat should read his work, including *The Limits of Airpower*, and his more recent NDU Press monographs on the Lavelle Affair and how B-52 crews adapted to the losses of Operations Linebacker I and II. But *Between Two*

*Shades of Blue* is a remarkable first work of fiction, and Air University Press is to be applauded for taking the risk of publishing it. Maybe another similar work will come my way.

Mark Clodfelter has provided as close a brush with the life of a young man of those times of change in the late 1970s at our military academies as one who experienced it can do. Trying to display the trials and complications of different worlds such as the Air Force Academy and the University of North Carolina does, in fact, offer a glimpse into two very different shades of blue. Each has its value in understanding where military academy graduates come from and what they are changed into in order to serve the nation. Some parts of us are lost to youth, but as this book wonderfully portrays, the best of our character rises from within each of us and, if we seek it, places us on the road to success in life. **Æ**

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