

**THE LONELY SOLDIER MONOLOGUES:  
WOMEN AT WAR IN IRAQ**

**A NONFICTION PLAY  
BY**

**HELEN BENEDICT**

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**ORIGINALLY PERFORMED AS,  
THE LONELY SOLDIER MONOLOGUES  
(WOMEN AT WAR IN IRAQ)**

a play by Helen Benedict

Directed by William Electric Black

Helen Benedict, the playwright, culled the monologues of these seven soldiers from their own words, which Benedict gathered while interviewing for her book, *THE LONELY SOLDIER. THE PRIVATE WAR OF WOMEN SERVING IN IRAQ* (Beacon Press, 2009.) Benedict created most of the monologues from taped interviews, but some are combined with letters the soldiers wrote by e-mail. None are fictionalized.

The names of the soldiers and their families and friends, along with some identifying details, have been changed to protect their privacy.

*THE LONELY SOLDIER MONOLOGUES* was originally performed at the Theater for the New City, 155 First Avenue, New York, from March 5 to March 22, 2009.

Presented by Theater for the New City in association with Electric Black Experience Productions.

The cast and creative contributors were.

Director.....William Electric Black (a.k.a. Ian James)

Specialist Maria Sanchez.....Julia A. Grob  
Specialist Clara Henderson.....Allison Troesch  
Sergeant Terris Dewalt-Johnson.....Verna Hampton  
Specialist Anna Peterford.....Macah Coates  
Sergeant Miriam Ruffolo..... Cara Liander  
Specialist Sylvia Gonzalez.....Athena Colon  
Sergeant First Class Santiago Flores.....Kim Weston-Moran

Choreography, tap dancing and miscellaneous appearances by Jeremy Lardieri.  
Set and lighting design by Federico Restrepo.  
Costume design is Tilly Grimes.  
Production Coordinator/Manager Chriz Zaborowski.  
Sound Design/Drums are by Jim Mussen.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Benedict is a professor of journalism at Columbia University and author of six novels and five books of nonfiction. In 2011, she published *Sand Queen* (Soho Press), a novel about two women on opposite sides of the Iraq War. In 2009, she published *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*. **In 2015, she was shortlisted for the Liberty Human Rights Award in the UK for the performance of *The Lonely Soldier Monologues* in London, in May 2015.** In 2013, her writings on the war won the Ida B. Wells Award for Bravery in Journalism, and she was named one of the 21 Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by Womens eNews. In 2008-2010, her work won the Exceptional Merit in Media Award from The National Women's Caucus, The Ken Book Award from the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and the James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism.

Credited with being the first journalist to break the story of military sexual assault during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, Benedict has testified twice to Congress on behalf of women soldiers. Her work on women soldiers inspired a class action lawsuit in 2011 against the Pentagon and Defense Secretaries Rumsfeld and Gates on behalf of members of the military who were sexually assaulted while serving. Her work has also inspired several documentaries and many television programs and articles in the international press, including the Oscar-nominated 2012 film, *The Invisible War*, which has led to numerous legal and policy reforms in the U.S. military.

The play was also performed at the Cockpit Theatre in London, UK, in May 2015, directed and produced by Prav Menon-Johnson of Limnal Space Productions. The BBC covered the play twice, and the story has led to further news stories and interviews about sexual harassment and the treatment of women in the British Army.

Benedict's essays and book reviews have appeared in the New York Times, The Nation, The Washington Post, Salon, The Huffington Post, Ms., In These Times, PBS, The Women's Review of Books, The Daily Beast, and elsewhere.

Her novels have received citations for best book of the year from The Los Angeles Times and the Chicago and New York Public Libraries.

*The Lonely Soldier Monologues* is based on Benedict's interviews for her book, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women in Iraq* (Beacon Press, 2009).

[www.helenbenedict.com](http://www.helenbenedict.com)

[www.lonelysoldierplay.com](http://www.lonelysoldierplay.com)

**CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE**

**Army Specialist Maria Sanchez, 21**

**Served in Iraq 2005-2006.**

*Maria is a Mexican-American from California. She can sound bitter, but most of the time exudes a natural, upbeat charm.*

**Army Specialist Clara Henderson, 19**

**Served in Iraq 2005-2006.**

*Clara is white and from a small town in Montana. She has a soft voice and a hesitant manner. She sounds shaky and vulnerable but never self-pitying.*

**Army Sergeant Terris Dewalt-Johnson, 37**

**Served in Iraq 2005-2006.**

*Terris is African American, with a deep voice and a manner both tough and full of humor. When she tells her stories, she talks directly to those involved, points and gestures, and reproduces facial expressions and dialogue like a one-person movie.*

**Army Specialist Anna Peterford, 24**

**Served in Iraq 2003-2004.**

*Anna is white and from a tiny rural town in Wisconsin. She has a thoughtful manner and is clearly well educated.*

**Air Force Sergeant Miriam Ruffolo, 27**

**Served in Afghanistan 2006.**

*Miriam, who is white, has a military posture and a slight Southern accent. She has a formal, almost stiff manner with which she is trying to disguise her distress.*

**Army Specialist Sylvia Gonzalez, 20**

**Served in Iraq 2003-2004.**

*Sylvia is a Latina who grew up in a small town in the mid-West. She is blunt, tough and often funny.*

**Army Sergeant First Class, Santiago Flores, 45**

**Served in Iraq 2004.**

*Santiago is Native American and a woman of great dignity. Sometimes she sounds soft and thoughtful, other times fierce and tough.*

**OPTIONAL. Recruiter, Boyfriend, Sergeant, etc.**

*This single male part plays various small parts throughout the play, acting as a reflection of the men these women deal with.*

**ALTERNATIVE TO MAN. The Voiceless Soldier.**

**(Created by Prav Menon-Johnson of PMJ Productions, Limnal Space, London, 2015.)**

*This female actor plays the various small parts throughout the play, such as Grammy, Clara's parents, boyfriends, recruiter, etc, acting as a reflection of the other people, including men, the women deal with. She then comes in at the end to represent all the women who cannot tell their stories, silenced by fear, threats, trauma, or simply because there is no one willing to listen.*

· N.B. All the soldiers in this play pronounced Iraq *eye-rack*. When they tell their stories, they may sound upset at times, but they NEVER sound whiney or complaining. They are soldiers, simply describing conditions at war. And they are all tough.

**Author's request.** Because this is a documentary play and the words are real words spoken by real veterans, the author requests that the words not be altered or placed in the mouths of anyone other than those who spoke them.

**Scene**

Throughout this 90 minute play (no intermission), three benches sit on the stage. The actors can manipulate the benches into beds, Humvees, trucks, machine guns, or seats in a waiting room. No other scenery is necessary, although sandbags and harsh light can contribute to a sense of the heat and burning sun of Iraq.

In many of the scenes, the soldiers can stay on or near the benches, frozen, while someone speaks, or they speak to one another. This allows interaction between the characters and action without manufacturing dialogue.

# THE LONELY SOLDIER MONOLOGUES: WOMEN AT WAR IN IRAQ

## ACT ONE BEFORE

**ENSEMBLE.** (*Chants "kill, kill, kill" in the dark, entering from all around the audience, while some start up this basic training song*)

Bomb the village, kill the people  
Throw some Napalm in the square  
Do it on a Sunday morning  
Do it on their way to prayer.  
Ring the bell inside the schoolhouse  
Watch those kiddies gather round  
Lock and load with your 240  
Mow them little motherfuckers down.

*(Light comes up on Maria)*

**MARIA.** (*Standing at attention, saluting.*) My name is Maria Sanchez, sir! And I was in Iraq for eleven months from 2005 to '06, sir! (*Laughs, as if she's playing around at this.*) I was nineteen.

I grew up in California, sir -- East L.A. My grandma, Grammy, mostly raised me....

**GRAMMY'S VOICE** (*from elsewhere in theater*): Maria! *Ven pa' casa!*

**MARIA.** ... 'cause my mom was a junkie and she was always getting evicted Grammy and me really loved each other. She was Mexican but she looked white, like me. We were so alike we were like sisters!

But when I was sixteen, Grammy got cancer. And the day before my seventeenth birthday, she died. (Grows sad.) I knew she was sick...But you never actually expect it, you know?

My grandpa, Grammy's husband, he didn't know what to do with me after that. Made me feel like he wasn't my grandpa anymore. So I joined a graffiti crew, got kicked out of one school, then another. My boyfriend lived right opposite my school and I'd go see him instead of going to classes. I was smoking a lot of weed, messing up. (*Clowns a bit with this line.*)

In the end I got sick and tired of myself, so I started thinking about the Army. (*Enter recruiter. She walks up to him.*)

Recruiters were in the school hallways all the time, so I went to see one, and he said.

**RECRUITER.** If you sign up with the National Guard you won't have to serve outside the country.

**MARIA (to audience).** National – that means *in* the country, right? And then he said...

**RECRUITER.** You get three thousand bucks just for enlisting. The Army will pay for college, train you in whatever job I want. And you'll be able to travel!

**MARIA.** All I had to do was sign up for six years.

I wanted to do something to be proud of. I imagined telling my grandchildren one day that I'd done something to protect the country. It was the year after 9/11, so I guess a lot of people felt that way.

So I told the recruiter I would sign up. He said I had to get a signature from my mom because I was only seventeen. Hadn't seen my mom in months, but I called her anyway and told her. She just said...

**MOTHER'S VOICE (from elsewhere).** If you wanna join, forge my name, I don't care.



**MARIA.** So I forged her name right under the recruiter's nose. He told me...

**RECRUITER.** We do this all the time. Don't worry about it.

**MARIA.** Well, I got the three thousand dollars. (*Recruiter hands her a wad of bills.*) But it was spread out over four years. (*He takes back half.*) And they took the taxes out! (*He snatches them all back and walks off.*)

The Army never paid for any college I wanted to go to. And I found out you can't join for six years, it has to be eight, so I'm in till I'm, like, twenty-four. And I never got to travel anywhere. Except to the war in Iraq.

The whole time I was in Iraq I was a daze 'cause I worked nights and I was shot at every night. Mortars were coming in – and mortars is death! When they say only men are allowed on the front lines, that's the biggest crock of shit! I was a tank gunner! (*Climbs up on a bench.*)

But when I say I was in the war, nobody listens. Nobody believes I was a soldier. And you know why? (*Stands at attention.*) Because I'm a female.

(*Sits on bench in dark. Lights up on Clara.*)

**CLARA.** (*Reads a verse from the Bible aloud*) When I was a freshman in high school, I vowed I'd never be in the Army. I wanted to go to college, you know? But my parents are real religious, and Momma told me...

**MOTHER'S VOICE** (*from elsewhere*): Clara, you don't need to go to college. You can do God's work better in the Army.

**CLARA.** It's strange, 'cause she and my Dad went to college, but they told me I didn't need to go.

I was working as a cook at Bible Camp in the summers and I saw how I could make kids happy doing that. So I thought maybe Momma was right. Maybe serving food in the Army would give me a mission to spread the word of

God. So she took me to the recruitment office. I was still sixteen then. (*Mimes going to office and taking a test.*)

They gave me the test that shows what jobs you can do in the military, and my scores suggested that I could be a nurse. I wasn't sure about that – all I ever wanted to be was a teacher.

But then the recruiters started calling my home all the time. And one day this recruiter came to my house. He was three years older than me, a model picture boy. You know, blond and blue-eyed and so handsome in his uniform? He told me I could be a chaplain's assistant and that appealed me because it was religious. And he was one of those perfect guys, you know? So I joined the Reserves. Momma signed the waiver 'cause I wasn't seventeen yet.

It was 2004 by then, but Momma and me weren't worried about the war. We knew you could die just as easily crossing the street.

It's all in God's plan when you die -- whether you go to war or not.

*(Joins Maria on bench.)*

**TERRIS.** (*Comes on with baseball bat.*) Name is Terris -- Sergeant Dewalt-Johnson to you. I am thirty-seven years old and the mother of four kids. Two boys and two girls.

My home is in Georgia now, but I grew up in D.C. My life was pretty drastic. My stepfather was a drunk, beat up on my mom all the time. Beat on me and my brothers and sisters, too, but he saved the worst of it for her. He hit her with a hammer, lacerated her legs, broke her skull. One time he stabbed her thirteen times with a long kitchen knife till it sank in so deep he couldn't pull the knife out. She only survived because she was so fat.

By the time I was thirteen, I learned to fight him back. (*Boxes in air.*) Laid him out flat with a baseball bat once! (*Laughs and mimes the action with the bat.*) It was, "I got to kill this guy or he's gonna kill my mom."

Soon as I could, I moved out and started living with my boyfriend. (*Walks over to other soldiers on bench and talks to them, woman to woman.*) He's my husband now, a gentleman and a sweetheart -- I've known him since I was nine.

*(Facing audience again.)* By the time I was nineteen, we had two kids and I was working two jobs, one at MacDonald's and the other selling tour tickets in Union Station.

One day this recruiter comes up to me and says, "You ever thought about joining the military?" He tells me about how I could travel, pay for college. And I got interested because I'd always wanted to travel.

So I joined the Army Reserves, and that enabled us to get out of D.C.. D.C. is such a poison place to me! All you've got is a bunch of drugs and killing. Three of my brothers got shot to death there for no reason. My son was shot in the feet in a drive-by when he was just five years old, playing in the yard.

It's because of the military that my four kids live like they do now. We have a nice house. They go to good schools. So I liked being in the Army.

Then they sent me to Iraq.

*(Joins others on bench. Enter Anna.)*

**ANNA.** I grew up in a small rural town in Wisconsin. It's only about two thousand people, so pretty much everybody knows everybody. There were two types of people in my town, the people who left and the people who stayed.

My way of getting out was to join the Army National Guard when I was seventeen. A lot of people from my high school were in the military, so it didn't seem like any big deal.

But my parents weren't happy about it. I come from a very political household. My dad was an elected official, and we're Democrats. So I had to really argue with them to get them to sign and let me join. They said...

**PARENTS' VOICES** *(from elsewhere)*. Anna, we just want to make sure you know what you're getting into.

**ANNA.** But I was stubborn. I thought I wanted to give something back to society, do something for my country.

But really, it was a rebellion.

When I joined the military I got an overwhelmingly good response from my community. If I went downtown or to the supermarket in my uniform, people were proud of me. It made me feel like I belonged.

After all, it was pre-9/11. We all thought differently then.

In August 2001, I shipped out to do my training at Fort Jackson, and Zero Day – the day you meet your drill instructor – turned out to be Sept. 11th. We'd just finished taking the oath when the drill sergeant said something about a plane hitting towers, but I couldn't really hear. People were running to the barracks, getting hysterical. The sergeant was saying "We're going to war!" (*Man shouts this out, other actors on stage show panic, bewilderment.*)

But I just thought it was part of the training. Took me a couple hours to realize it was real.

After that, there were rumors that training would speed up and we'd be sent over. But it didn't happen. The training just went on as normal. We stuck bayonets into man-shaped targets. Sang songs about blood and killing. And didn't bat an eye 'cause we were already desensitized.

*(Chorus, led by Anna)*

What makes the green grass grow?

Blood, blood, bright red blood

What makes the pretty flowers bloom?

Guts, guts, gritty grimy guts.

*(Calls out over the chant)* The real reason somebody kills on the battlefield isn't because of those songs. It isn't because we stuck a bayonet into a dummy on the assault course either. It's because our best friend's sitting next to us in the cab and we don't want him to die.

*(Whistle blows, soldiers stand in line at attention, joined by all but Sylvia.*

*Miriam steps forward.)*

**MIRIAM.** My name is Miriam Ruffolo, I'm twenty-seven and third generation Air Force. My grandfather and father were Air Force officers. All my life I wanted to be like them.

I joined the Air Force Reserves after high school, and put myself through school during my enlistment. I got married, too, and had a baby girl.

My daughter was only two years old when I was deployed. That was March 2003, right as the U.S. was going into Iraq. I had to leave her with my husband. We're divorced now.

It was so hard to leave my little girl, worrying about would she be fed right, would she be able to sleep. It really hurt to hear her little voice on the phone.

I was on active duty for a little over eight years in the Air Force. I was a public affairs specialist -- that means a combat correspondent -- and a photographer. I *loved* my job.

*(Miriam steps back into formation, man as sergeant hands them letters. They open and read, chatting among selves. Santiago steps forward.)*

**SANTIAGA.** I am Santiago Flores, forty-six years old, and retired from twenty-two years in the Army. I was a drill sergeant who taught other people how to be drill sergeants, so I have a drill sergeant personality.

Used to tell my soldiers, *(yells this to another soldier on stage)* "I don't give a damn if you don't like me. I'm not here to be your friend. If you have an idea and you think it'll work, I'm open to that. But you don't mess with Sergeant Flores."

Joining the military isn't unusual for Native people. It's our way of holding on to the idea of being a warrior, of being a provider and a protector. It's something that we find great honor and pride in, and it's hard to find things that bring honor to your family for Natives nowadays.

Until I was ten we never lived in one place long enough for me to finish out a grade of school. My dad kept moving to find one job or another, but also because he was trying to run away from his drinking. You know drinking is a problem for Native people? Well, it was no different for my family.

Finally, he bought a house and we stayed put.

*(Exit Santiago. Sylvia enters.)*

**SYLVIA.** My dad is a supervisor at a bakery. My mom's a bank teller. They raised me in a little town in southern Wisconsin. I didn't have any direction after high school. So I joined the Army Military Police. Became Specialist Sylvia Gonzalez!

I did it for the money and the challenge. And the discipline.

My parents didn't have much of an opinion of me enlisting. If that's what I wanted, it was fine with them. So Mom signed the papers 'cause I was only seventeen.

Then 9/11 happened. And I was mobilized to Iraq.

*(Rest of soldiers form line, at attention, march off stage. Sylvia follows them, watching, then turns to audience.)*

Nine-eleven made a lot of people proud of being in military, including me. I wasn't scared! I was glad I was in an organization that would do something about this. But I never paid much attention to the war in Iraq at first. I figured it wasn't my place to get involved in something I didn't know about. The only thing that worried me was that I was going to be away from home for a whole year.

They sent me notice three weeks before I had to go. My family don't deal with things emotionally. So I just figured out my stuff. *(Pause.)* And left. *(Runs offstage.)*

*(Santiago re-enters.)*

**SANTIAGA.** When I was thirteen, my dad brings home this white guy to work for him fixing cars. George.

This was 1973, and George was just back from Vietnam. He had one leg shorter than the other, he'd spent a whole year in hospital with his wounds, and people said he'd raped girls in Vietnam. I didn't like him at all.

But he started being nice to me. Took me to a drive-in movie and gave me a joint to smoke and something to drink. Then he raped me. And I got pregnant from that rape.

My dad was furious. Thought it was all my fault -- he didn't care that I was only thirteen.

So he makes me get in the car and we go looking for George. We find him pretty quick. "Get in the fucking car," my dad says -- he was six feet tall and people did what he said. So George gets in, and Dad drives us back to the house, sits us down at the kitchen table, and pulls out a gun. He places it on the table in front of us.

"You have five minutes and two choices," he tells George. "You either marry my daughter or die."

All I could think was, "If my dad shoots George he's going to go to prison. Then all of us are going to be without a dad, my mom's going to be without a husband, and it'll all be my fault."

So I told George I'd marry him.

*(Soft, sad voice here.)* I really hated him.

My oldest son is the product of that rape. I love him, but he knows the story and he feels pretty alienated from my family. He hates having an Indian mom because he sees no honor in that.

*(Voice hardens again.)* For the next few years, I live with George. He's beating the crap out of me all the time, and I'm turning to drink just like the rest of my family. When I'm sixteen, I get pregnant again. Birth control? Nobody told me about it. And I had so much trauma in my life, who thought about that?

Finally, I just can't take it anymore. So I decide to kill George and dump him in Lake Tahoe, but he's such a big man I can't figure out how I'm going to get his body there. I'm going to have to put him on a boat alive and then kill him, and he's a really strong guy. So I think, "Okay. That isn't going to work."  
*(Laughs and pulls a rueful face).*

By the time I'm twenty, George's landed in jail again for attacking me and I'm divorced at last.

So there I am, living in a one-bedroom, cockroach-infested apartment with two kids, and I'm on welfare. So I'm thinking, what am I going to do? That's when I decide to join the Army.

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