Several people are waiting to greet Captain Vivian Gembara when she returns home after a year-long tour of duty in Iraq—her grateful fiancés and two officers dispatched from headquarters to retrieve the file. Certainly not the homecoming she expected, but such is life when you are in the business of soldiers behaving badly. As a lawyer for the U.S. Army, Vivian counsels them, investigates them, and when necessary, prosecutes them. When an Iraqi teenagers body is found floating in the Tigris River and U.S. soldiers are believed to have been involved, she knows she has a case on her hands. What she doesn’t realize is just how much that case will reveal about the Armys conduct at war. Drowning in the Desert: A JAGs Search for Justice in Iraq is both a legal thriller and a searing account of the savagery that occurs when commanders place the fight above all else.
Personal Review: Drowning in the Desert: A JAGs Search for Justice in Iraq by Deborah A. Gembara

An excellent read. This book describes a young female JAG officer's year in Iraq as the legal officer assigned to an infantry brigade. It touches briefly on the more mundane aspects of her job: legal assistance to troops (wills and other legal advice) and handling of claims by Iraqis for injuries and property damage. But the primary focus is on two non-combat killings of two Iraqi men by soldiers of the brigade.

As a retired Army officer, I find the story depressing. I am disappointed at the failure of the Army to deliver Justice. Disappointed, but not surprised. It has been ever thus (remember the failure of top authorities to respond appropriately to the My Lai massacre and to the exploits of the Tiger Force in Vietnam?).

I have followed these and similar cases in the press, but this book provides a view from the inside. Although this view is limited to the perspective of a JAG officer at the bottom of the totem pole, it is a testament to this young woman's moral courage and understanding of what the Army should try to be.

The Army's record on similar matters in Iraq is not impressive; the Marine Corps's record on these matters is downright unsatisfactory. I fought in Vietnam and understand the pressures of combat. But none of those pressures justify the deliberate killing of noncombatants, even "suspected" insurgents. I hope someday to read a detailed history of all of the cases involving non-combat killings of Iraqis by US troops.

This book should be required reading for every officer prior to deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan.

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