

## **Eugene Ratz (ER) talks to Niall Munro (NM)**

**Niall Munro** Thank you so much Eugene for taking the time to talk to me about some of your experiences and your work. Could we start just by you saying a little bit about what your military experience has been and also your experience as a writer.

**Eugene Ratz** Yeah, my military experience was airborne infantry in the 82nd airborne and 173rd. Deployed with both units to Afghanistan in 2009 and then again in 2012. Then I got out of the military in 2014. My experience in the military was with a great group of men that were strong and intelligent and worked hard together to push each other to do things that I haven't been able to come close to since until actually these last few days being around a group of fellow veteran writers and thinkers who are able to go into those sorts of combat experiences and think about them, intellectualise them in a way that doesn't negate the emotional side of it, but is also able to construct it in terms of layered political engagement, to try and piece through it without devaluing the human relationships with the Afghan people and our other soldiers.

**NM** And in terms of your experience when you came back--so you haven't had that opportunity to share those experiences?

**ER** No, not at all. In America, those conversations don't really happen. When people find out I was in the military, there's no dialogue or questions. Whereas, when I've been in Europe and they ask what I'm doing in Europe, when I was stationed in Germany, there was a whole series of questions. I'm not sure why but I tend to think it's the distance of the people. In America, I think friends and family and people you come into contact with don't really want to know and feel like they can't ask those things because it's encroaching and I kind of understand that but it's nice to be able to share some of a pretty serious part of life--those experiences were the best and the worst [laughter] that I could imagine, I think.

**NM** So when you say that they might encroach on you, do you think they think you'll be traumatised by recalling them?

**ER** Yes definitely and they think that they're not allowed to ask, they're not allowed to ask those things. And I don't know, I've heard, I think, the myth was like world war two veterans never talked about it so people kind of took that like oh I shouldn't of asked anything. And I think it's like fear of asking and offending and also fear of hearing the truth.

**NM** The truth of what actually happened there?

**ER** Right, and I think friends and family they don't want to be upset because they're close to me and close to soldiers and they don't really want to know about that you were hurt and that your friends were hurt and that you're still hurt. But it's a shame because they also don't necessarily get to hear about... they imagine that's the reality when really some of the greatest times of my life were on deployment to Afghanistan, and just being able to spend it in a really tight-knit community and also see other communities like the Afghan people and the way they lived and I kind of encroached on their lives but be able to experience it too.

**NM** Yeah and you talk about community. Do you think there's a way in which a writing community could also push you, not in the same kind of way but in a kind of, in a provocative way, in a way that might help?

**ER** Definitely, the last few days, just being able to talk to some of the British ex service members and the Americans here together and think about these things and how they affected us, how they are talked about in literature and media, and the images of the wars, and of military veterans, and the types of things, stories that we're telling each other because we have shared experiences and we don't have to explain things. We can go right in to... we have that comfort level and a common experiential language so we can go much deeper than we do on our own, I think. And also the stories that just come up that we're telling each other, and the different perspectives that we all have even though there's some sort of commonality over deployments over the years, are completely different, different jobs, and you see different things. But the stories we're telling each other these days--meaning these last two days here [in Oxford]--are the types of stories that we need to be writing.

**NM** So that's really interesting so is there a way in which literature and that could be poetry and I suppose your writing or could be fiction whatever because you wrote when you were in the military anyway. Is poetry a kind of.. What is it about poetry as a form I guess that helps you do that?

**ER** The poetic form, for me, I kind of, it's hard to say because sometimes I... I've used it as a... it's someone else reading it could see a literal narrative that's definitely related to times in combat and military experience but that's not necessarily what I like to do with it and what I like to do is much more like a game that I play with myself [mhmm] that has layers of images and meanings and words taken out of context from military experience where it's almost somebody that was in the military reading the types of poems that I like to write would understand some of the words out of the context whereas, people without that jargon and experience have no idea what it's about. But a lot of people, they like that, because then they can play games with it too. Because it's able to... I think with poetry you can do something where you don't have to rest in this sort of negative, traumatic place--you can bring in what happened before and after with that, and give space for the trauma without repressing it and also repressing all the love and positive aspects of the experiences that happened around the same time, because there's a tendency with trauma to block out and repress a whole period of time, and I've found that, in doing that, you don't want to remember, you can't remember everything that wasn't negative in that time period. And so it's kind of you're doing a disservice, for me I was, I didn't want to remember things, I was really forgetting a lot of the best times of my life and people. So I like using poetry to bring all of that together, so it's a more complete, nuanced, kind of, understanding of experience and to laugh about things now because it's not happening to me now. And that's what poetry can really do is realise what the body has been through and where it is now and what's actually happening in the physical present moment, and using to language to kind of create experiences and also situate the present moment.

**NM** That's so interesting. Thank you so much for sharing all of that.

**ER** My pleasure. Thank you for having me.