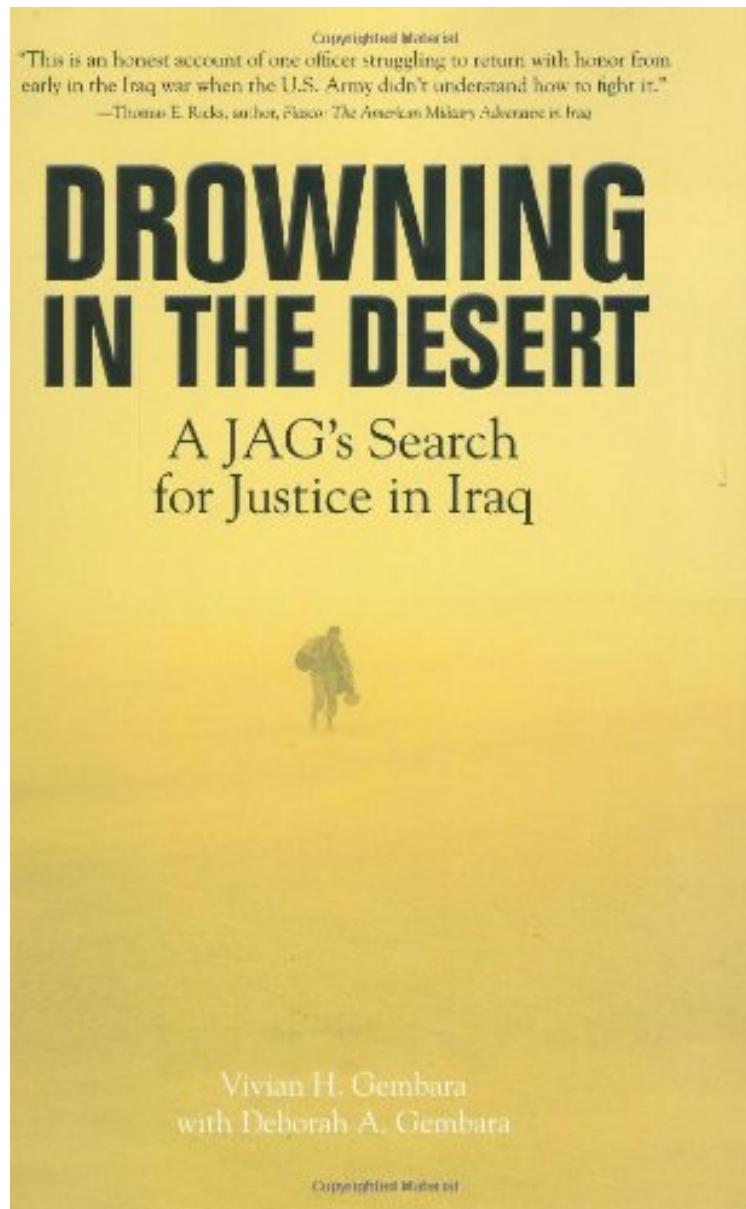


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Drowning in the Desert: A JAG's Search for Justice in Iraq

Vivian H. Gembara, Deborah A. Gembara
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Vivian H. Gembara, Deborah A. Gembara : Drowning in the Desert: A JAG's Search for Justice in Iraq before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Drowning in the Desert: A JAG's Search for Justice in Iraq:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Gripping Story -- but Reads Like a NovelBy TigerTCVivian

Gembara's "Drowning in the Desert: A JAG's Search for Justice in Iraq" is a gritty, disturbing, and real account of then-Captain Gembara's time in Iraq and her internecine battle with a renegade battalion. Gembara conducted two of the earliest courts-martial in Iraq and then became involved in investigations into the murders of Iraqis condoned and covered up by the battalion leadership. Her story is gripping and very interesting, and although she is motivated by a search for justice, she doesn't seem to have a major political axe to grind: she just has the usual frustrations of being a tiny cog in a large Army and the normal frustrations and travails of being a staff officer (higher headquarters doesn't understand what's really going on and lower headquarters aren't responsive enough to what is really important). Her story clearly frustrated her as she never could find the justice she believed should have been served, and there is a sense of sadness reading this story. As good as the story is, the book suffers from one major flaw: its style is like a novel, not a memoir. That is, the book is almost completely driven by dialogue and by the tiny details of the characters' actions and reactions. Also, many of the characters feel too developed, as if each person in the story had a role in a story and their actions and personality were written to that role. While this makes for easy, entertaining reading, the discerning reader knows that conversations and details can't be remembered years later and is left wondering how many of the details are true and how many arise from some literary license. Unfortunately, there is not even an author's note to try to explain how accurate this book is to the historical record and how much of it is simply "based on actual events." Still, this book does show what life at a brigade is like in Iraq, even if it's just a tiny slice of that life during a short period in a tiny part of Iraq. While one shouldn't draw too many sweeping conclusions from this book, one can see the Army's inability to recognize and conduct a proper counterinsurgency in 2003 and 2004. This is a very good book for anyone interested in the Iraq War or in military justice.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.
Great memoir, light on the details of how the experience shaped the author's future
By 24fan957
Drowning in the Desert made me feel engaged, almost like I was a fly on the wall during the author's tour in Iraq. I enjoyed her style, level of detail, and meaningful commentary on what must have been a challenging, difficult period in her life. The one criticism I have is that there could have been more detail about the author in the epilogue, especially because the book came out 4 years after she left Iraq. There's plenty about the other characters, but what I really want to know is what did Captain Gembara do after the army and why? Did her JAG experience shape her next choices in life? What lessons did she apply to her own career? What were her cases like when she got back to Fort Carson? I had to check the author's website to see that she's now a journalist. Did her JAG experience make her want to quit being a lawyer? I was left wondering.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.
Riveting and compelling account of a courageous woman's quest for justice
By saraht
I am considering a career in the JAGC and Captain Gembara's story in this book has pushed me closer to choosing the same path that she did. Despite the hardships, the struggles and the devastating lack of support she received, Capt. Gembara persevered and was able to seek justice to the best of her abilities. As a female considering a career in the JAGC, it was inspiring to read about how hard she fought to defend the principles of our country-- as hard as any other soldier. Aside from my personal reasons for enjoying this book, it was written extremely well and keeps you turning the pages like a maniac. In my opinion, John Grisham has nothing on Capt. Gembara.

Several people are waiting to greet Captain Vivian Gembara when she returns home after a year-long tour of duty in Iraq--her grateful fianc 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 teenager's 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 Army's conduct at war. *Drowning in the Desert: A JAG's 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.

From Publishers Weekly
This is a disturbing collection of experiences of a judge advocate general officer, a lawyer for an army brigade fighting the insurgency from 2003 to 2004. Undergoing modest risk--the occasional mortar attack, ambush danger in traveling the roads--Capt. Vivian Gembara endured as much physical discomfort as the fighting men plus long working hours because of chronic understaffing. The pace never flags as Gembara describes struggling to solve soldiers' personal problems; dealing with the cliques, rivalries, and petty politics of rear area service; and trying (often in vain) to ensure troops observed the official Rules of Engagement and Geneva Conventions. When soldiers were accused of deserting, officers leaned over backward to see justice done. When other soldiers murdered several innocent Iraqis, she discovered that the soldiers, who said they were following orders, were terrified of a sadistic sergeant. The author succeeded only partially in prosecuting the murders, and the extensive coverup occupies the second half of the book. I will always be disappointed by my chain-of-command's cowardly handling of the murders, Gembara writes in this straightforward, honest account, and many readers will share her outrage. Maps. (Oct. 15)
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From the Inside Flap
A number of people are waiting to greet Captain Vivian Gembara when the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division

returns home to Fort Carson after a year-long tour of duty in Iraq her grateful fianc, Vivians parents and sister, and two senior judge advocate general (JAG) officers from post and division legal office. Captain Gembara is pleased that Majors John Rawcliffe and Kerry Cuneo have made time to welcome her home. Prior to Vivian deploying as 3rd Brigade to Iraq, Major Cuneo had been Vivians boss in the criminal law section of the JAG office. Still riding the wave of euphoria, I hugged Cuneo and gave a handshake and half-hug to Rawcliffe, truly touched that theyd come out. . . . Cuneo and Rawcliffe smiled uneasily, their arms hanging at their sides, long and awkward. Her happiness with this professional courtesy is short-lived, however, when she is asked to retrieve the file. Certainly not the homecoming she expected, but such is life when your business is dealing with soldiers who have behaved badly. As a lawyer for the U.S. Army, a JAG, Vivian Gembaras professional life is all about soldiers: she counsels them, investigates them, and when necessary, prosecutes them. When an Iraqis body is found floating in the Tigris River and American soldiers from 3rd Brigade are believed to have been involved, she knows she has a case on her hands. What she doesnt realize is just how much that case will reveal about the armys conduct at war. Drowning in the Desert is both a legal thriller and a searing account of the savagery that can occur when commanders place the fight above all else.