



Ruff's War: A Navy Nurse on the Frontline in Iraq

Cdr. Cheryl L. Ruff, Cdr. K. Sue Roper

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Twenty-five years in the Navy had made Cheryl Ruff an independent, resilient, strong woman - and a master at providing patient care while serving at various Navy hospitals around the world. But nothing prepared her mind, body, soul, and spirit for what she experienced on the frontlines of the Iraq war as a member of the Bravo Surgical Company. Known as the "devil docs," they followed directly behind the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force as they entered Iraq at the onset of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003. Right along with the Marines, Commander Ruff, the only female nurse anesthetist at the front, and the rest of her surgical team learned to endure the brutal conditions of the desert while regularly confronting questions of life and death. Working in temperatures well over 100 degrees in full MOP gear, Ruff and her team set up mobile hospital tents in the sand wherever needed. As Black Hawk helicopters brought in steady streams of the wounded, they found it impossible to maintain standard sterilization procedures, and clean up often amounted to just shovelling the blood-soaked sand out of the tent. During surgery they often wore lighted helmets so they could continue operating if the generator failed and donned gas masks when warnings were issued. These horrific conditions, coupled with the gruesome images of shredded bodies and the cries of wounded children, became Ruff's world. This is her story of the war, up close and personal. It is a story of sacrifice, survival, and courage, movingly written by a woman unconditionally dedicated to the life-saving mission of the United States Navy Nurse Corps.

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