BOOK REVIEW

Oh, Say, Can You See? The Semiotics of the Military in Hawai‘i
By Kathy E. Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull

When I was growing up in Hawai‘i Marsden matting (the stuff of World War II landing strips) was the fencing material of choice, especially out in the country. It could be found enclosing gardens, pigs, and chickens. My father spent almost his entire career as a cook at Tripler Hospital. As a construction laborer in Hawai‘i for a couple of years back in the late 60s I hauled construction trash from Pearl Harbor to the dump; poured concrete for the runways at Hickam Air Force Base; and nearly got electrocuted reinforcing the tunnels that brought fuel and water from the hills above Halawa to Pearl Harbor. I've also had to negotiate military convoys on Kamehameha Highway between Kahuiku and Waialua. While I was teaching in Honokaa sometime around 1970, a student was killed by a rocket found on Pohakuloa.

So I agree with Ferguson and Turnbull when they point out in their Oh, Say, Can You See? that just about anywhere you look in Hawaii, you can see the military or signs of their presence. I'm more skeptical when they say, in daily life few residents see the military at all. My sense is that the military in Hawai‘i is like an onion. The outer, more obvious layers are seen but the deeper layers are those that are “inconspicuously folded into the fabric of daily life.” And it is within these deeper layers that the dynamics of power and influence occur. This paradox of visibility and invisibility, of the available and the hidden, is the subject of the highly recommended Oh, Say, Can You See?, which maps the power relations that define Hawai‘i in relation to the national security state.

Authors Kathy E. Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull locate and "excavate" sites of memory, such as cemeteries, memorials, monuments, and museums, to show how the military constructs its gendered narrative upon prior colonial discourses. Among the sites considered are Fort DeRussy, Pearl Harbor, and Punchbowl Cemetery, as well as the practices of citizenship that are produced or foreclosed by the narratives of order and security written upon Hawaii by the military. But they are at their best when they argue that:

The military is thoroughly normalized within Hawai‘i, sedimenting itself through accumulated familiarity into the everyday ways of life that produce what we experience as normal. Through its dense ordinariness it becomes constitutive of Hawai‘i, not an interloper or even a visitor but a presence that simply and unproblematically belongs. p. xiv.

Ferguson and Turnbull provide many examples of how “Hawai‘i is in thrall to the military.” One that they missed is the message of Robert K. Stevens, principal of what is ostensibly a public school on O'ahu.
To provide for the diverse needs of our military clientele, we have created a Military Youth Advisory Council composed of an officer/ liaison representing the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. This council meets monthly to address issues and concerns that will further enhance the rapport between the civilian and military communities. We are privileged to have military families as members of our school community.

Over the years we have had the honor of working with students who subsequently excelled in the military, in various professions, in government, and in the private/ business sector. We are proud of the contributions made by our graduates throughout the United States. The school is appropriately named after Admiral Arthur W. Radford who is considered one of the most brilliant Naval Officers in military history. We are especially proud of our youngsters who make their contributions in the tradition of Admiral Radford. Graduates include those who serve as instructors at the Air Force Academy, pilots in the Navy and Air Force, Captains in command of their own ships, and Majors who serve as budget experts in the Army. Others who have served with distinction include a Rear Admiral from the class of 1962 and a pilot from the class of 1985 who is one of 80 Americans trained to fly a Stealth bomber. Admiral Radford's legacy of excellence in service is thus perpetuated.

Stevens illustrates those representational elements that both conceal and reveal the military's presence and power in Hawai‘i. But he also illustrates how difficult it is to expand discursive space so that other voices can be heard. Reading Ferguson and Turnbull is an excellent first step. This is an important work. I only wish they had eschewed the post-modernisms and written it to appeal to a broader audience. Mervyn L. Tano