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# Missing in Action: Women Warriors in Vietnam

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*Carol Lynn Mithers*

On Memorial Day, 1984, the unidentified remains of an American soldier killed in Vietnam were interred in a Washington tomb. He was not the war's only unknown.

For years after the American military defeat in Vietnam, the war seemed to disappear below the surface of a country that wanted only to forget it. The recent resurfacing has come in a cathartic flood of memoirs, novels, poems, studies, analyses and films, all seeking to explain, understand, or in some way come to terms with what happened in Vietnam. Vietnam veterans, once despised as “baby-killers” or pitied as emotional cripples, have reemerged as heroes. Yet as Vietnam material continues to pour out, threatening to turn the war into a small cottage industry, one group of war stories remains untold. Virtually all war memoirs and novels have been written by men. War analyses and studies have been written about men. But men were not the only ones who went to war.

About ten thousand women served with the U.S. military in Vietnam. The vast majority were nurses, low-ranking officers, but there were also enlisted women working as communications, intelligence and language specialists, air traffic controllers and aerial reconnaissance photographers. As a group they were different than the men who carried the guns — on the average, they were several years older, more educated, overwhelmingly white and middle-class — idealistic “good girls” who “grew up in Catholic homes, graduated from three-

year diploma Catholic nursing schools and had never been more than fifty miles away from their parents.”<sup>1</sup> All had volunteered to join the military; many specifically requested assignment to Vietnam.

In Vietnam, where fifty-seven thousand soldiers died, two hundred seventy thousand were wounded, and one of the best medical evacuation systems in history took men from combat to emergency room in half an hour, sheltered good girls found a “horror movie” of fear, death and mutilation: hospitals whose red crosses “just gave [the enemy] something to shoot at”;<sup>2</sup> seventy-hour operating room shifts patching bodies blown apart by mines, ripped by bullets and shrapnel, and burned by napalm; helicopters that came in “filled with hundreds and hundreds of body parts, arms, legs, heads. . . . There was a shelf [in the morgue] just for the heads. . . .”<sup>3</sup> Patriots for whom the admonition to “ask what you can do for your country” had been a moral imperative found themselves questioning their most basic assumptions. Not only did the reasons offered for U.S. involvement in Vietnam often appear too flimsy to support the weight of so much suffering and death, the day-to-day reality of the war itself seemed insane and out of control. There were dead civilians and children, and atrocity stories from both sides. There were GIs dead from drugs and “friendly fire,” and soldiers’ stories of their leaders’ deadly ineptitude. The GIs’ open racism against the Vietnamese also pervaded the hospitals: “We’d take some Vietnamese guy who was really injured and give him an extra hard jolt when we dropped him down. . . .”<sup>4</sup> And the jarring disjunction between the war as publicly reported and personally experienced suggested that either the U.S. government had no idea what was going on or was deliberately lying.

Male soldiers dealt with the war’s unacceptable contradictions by using drugs, striking out against the Vietnamese and each other, and, ultimately, refusing to fight. Women drank, smoked, “partied hard,” and sometimes had affairs that just brought more grief. Nurses forbidden to fraternize with enlisted men might become involved with doctors, most of whom were older and married, in relationships that ended abruptly and painfully when the men’s tours of duty were up, or see the men they had been dating brought into the emergency room in

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1. Lynda Van Devanter, interview with author, 1983.

2. Pamela White, interview with author, 1984.

3. Chris McGinley-Schneider, interview with author, 1984.

4. Pamela White, interview.

body bags. Some became cynical, some became bitter; many — like one nurse at the 27th Surgical Hospital in Chu Lai — learned to stop feeling anything at all:

The first three months, I'd get off work and write letters home describing what I'd seen, and cry while I wrote. After three months, I realized I couldn't keep allowing myself to be open to that kind of emotional trauma or I wasn't going to make it. I pulled up the barriers around myself. I stopped crying and I stopped writing letters home. I really numbed out.<sup>5</sup>

Like male GIs, women who finished their year tours of duty in Vietnam were abruptly dropped back into civilian life. The adjustment was, at best, difficult. Women who had been dealing with life and death had no patience for the more trivial concerns of normal American life. Nurses who had been full members of medical teams had “attitude problems” when it came to resuming their old relationships with doctors, and missed being needed as they had been in Vietnam. The continuing debate about the war raised conflicting emotions. And hardest of all, there was no way for a woman to come to grips with or even acknowledge what she had been through because it seemed no one wanted to hear. Brush-offs, whether intentional or not, came from friends and family, male vets who had their own problems, and the V.A., whose hospitals often lacked the facilities to give women the most basic health care. Isolated from each other, reluctant to identify themselves as veterans, in part, because the public image of a military woman was that of a lesbian, a whore, or a loser looking for a husband, the women tried to go on with their lives and waited for the war to go away.

It did not. In 1982, the first study of women's experiences in Vietnam and their after-effects showed a group of people seriously, often permanently, affected by their Vietnam service: significant percentages had suffered anxiety and depression, trouble sleeping, nightmares, war flashback, thoughts of suicide. Nearly half felt some emotional numbness and over half an inability to trust or become close to others. Sixty-five percent said they felt alienated from the government, and fifty-seven percent felt they had been used by it. And included in those “symptoms” reported as still present in their lives by

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5. Pat Miersma, interview with author, 1984.

over half the responding women were alienation, hypersensitivity to issues of fairness, justice and legitimacy, cynicism and mistrust of government, and ideological changes and confusion in value systems.<sup>6</sup> “I don’t believe anything I’m told by the government now,” said a nurse who returned from a year in the operating room at the 12th Evacuation Hospital in Cu Chi with an “explosive temper” and the ability to hear a helicopter coming long before anyone else in the room.

There’s something all of us know who’ve been in Vietnam. It’s not particularly how we were victimized. I guess it’s being demythed. Pretty painful to go through. See, everybody else is real comfortable with their lives. We’re all pretty much haunted by what happened to us, what we saw, what went on, why it happened. Maybe I could live a more peaceful life not knowing the things I found out.<sup>7</sup>

The experiences that women had in Vietnam were profound and painful; the stories that women Vietnam veterans have to tell are powerful and compelling. In fact, once one becomes aware of them there comes an inevitable question: why haven’t we heard them before? To be sure over the years there have been some accounts of women’s Vietnam experiences: two novels called *Vietnam Nurse* were published in 1966; “the view of the Vietnam war as the locale for a sort of extended prom date is certainly unusual,” commented one later review.<sup>8</sup> A third with the same title, published in 1984, is also a “romance,” containing descriptions of female sexual response so bizarre as to suggest the book was written by a male virgin. An episode of the old *Quincy, Medical Examiner* television show dealt with a Vietnam nurse suffering post-traumatic stress disorder; the film *Purple Hearts* was a love story set around a Vietnam hospital. The oral histories *Nam*, by Mark Baker, and *Everything We Had*, by Al Santoli, contain some women’s stories. In 1982, Patricia Walsh, who worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development as a civilian nurse-anesthetist in

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6. Jenny Ann Schnaier, “Women Vietnam Veterans and Mental Health Adjustment: A Study of Their Experiences and Post-Traumatic Stress,” unpublished Master’s thesis, 1982.

7. Pamela White, interview.

8. John Newman, *Vietnam War Literature* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1982), 44.

Danang, published *Forever Sad the Hearts*, the story of a civilian nurse in Vietnam; in 1983, Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* became the first autobiographical account of an army nurse's Vietnam experience. But such books and accounts — even the ludicrous ones — account for a negligible percentage of Vietnam literature and have never really penetrated the public consciousness. As recently as 1981, a chapter called “Women and the War,” written by a respected journalist for a mainstream Vietnam book, confines itself to feminism and the anti-war movement; women who went to Vietnam are never mentioned.<sup>9</sup>

Why the silence? And why, when one begins to listen, are there so few women's voices heard in the histories of *any* war? It is not because they have not been present, suffered and died: women were found among the slain at Waterloo,<sup>10</sup> women served as seamstresses, spies, and soldiers during the American Revolutionary War<sup>11</sup> and as nurses during the American Civil War. (Louisa May Alcott, best known for the sentimental *Little Women*, first made her reputation with *Hospital Sketches*, an account of her experiences as a Civil War nurse.<sup>12</sup>) During World War II, one hundred thousand Yugoslavian women fought after their country's regular army was destroyed; twenty-five thousand died. In Italy, twenty-five thousand women fought as partisans; six hundred twenty-four were killed or wounded; fifteen of those women — most of whom had been caught by the Germans and tortured to death — were awarded Italy's Gold Cross for Military Valor.<sup>13</sup> Sixty-seven Army nurses survived the defeats of Bataan and Corregidor and spent nearly three years in a Japanese POW camp in the Philippines;<sup>14</sup> eight women died in Vietnam. And when they have written of their war-time experiences, as did Vera Brittain, who served as a nurse during World War I, they have been eloquent:

“The strain all along,” I repeated dully, “is very great . . . very great.” What exactly did those words describe? The

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9. Susan Jacoby, “Women and the War,” in *The Wounded Generation: America After Vietnam*, ed. A.D. Horne (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1981), 81.

10. Helen Rogan, *Mixed Company: Women in the Modern Army* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 81.

11. Rogan, *Mixed Company*, 120-123.

12. Louisa May Alcott, *Hospital Sketches* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1960), introduction.

13. Rogan, *Mixed Company*, 85.

14. Rogan, *Mixed Company*, 258.

enemy within shelling distance — refugee Sisters crowding in with nerves all awry — bright moonlight, and aeroplanes carrying machine-guns — ambulance trains jolting noisily into the siding, all day, all night — gassed men on stretchers, clawing the air — dying men, reeking with mud and foul green-stained bandages, shrieking and writhing in a grotesque travesty of manhood — dead men with fixed, empty eyes and shiny, yellow faces . . . . Yes, perhaps the strain all along *had* been very great . . . .<sup>15</sup>

Women's Vietnam stories have not been heard because what women have to say is not considered a legitimate part of the war's history. Women who went to Vietnam shared with men the horror, contradictions and after-effects specific to this particular war, and with earlier generations of women, an exclusion specific to their sex: there has always been a place for women to serve in war, but there is no place for them in its mythology.

The mythological appeal of war is based in part on some very real attractions — the visual allure of its spectacle, the passionate feelings of comradeship engendered by the threat of danger and sense of community that comes from working with others toward a common goal, the chance it offers to “escape [from] the monotony of civilian life and the cramping restrictions of an unadventurous civilian existence.”<sup>16</sup> But most of all, there is the promise it offers of initiation into an inner circle. Those who have known combat know something the rest of us do not; they have proven themselves in a way we never can.

War's attractions call out to women as well as men — certainly women historically have had far more “cramping restrictions” and “unadventurous existences” from which they want to escape. Mere ability to survive in war, to endure hardship, danger and the threat of death, does not require a specific gender, but to become part of the warrior elite, the appeal at the heart of the war myth, does.

The actions a soldier takes in combat have symbolic, as well as literal, meaning. The standards for being a “real” soldier — “courage, endurance and toughness, lack of squeamishness when confronted with

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15. Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), 423.

16. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1959), 29.

shocking or distasteful stimuli, avoidance of display of weakness in general, reticence about emotional or idealistic matters . . .” — are almost indistinguishable from those of stereotypical “real” masculinity.<sup>17</sup> In civilian life a man can go years without having his courage, say, or lack of squeamishness challenged; in war the challenge is constant. Going to war, then, is not simply a test of one’s “courage” or “endurance” but also of one’s *manhood*. Someone who becomes a warrior has become a “real” man. “Real” men, of course, are the opposite of women — “Pussy!” the drill sergeant shouts at the recruit who is not making the grade, “*Woman!*” And although women require the presence and attention of men to “prove” their femininity, men cannot become men except in the absence of women. If combat is to “make” men, women cannot be included.

Women, of course, do have a place in war, as madonnas, pure incarnations of all men must fight to protect, or sexual objects — whore, rape victims, battle “spoils.” In Vietnam, military women were put in both categories. They were sometimes idealized — “someone wakes up on your OR table and says, ‘Oh my God I’ve died and gone to heaven and you’re an angel’ ”<sup>18</sup> — a “canonization” that had its drawbacks:

If the guys wanted to . . . screw ninety-seven prostitutes in a day, it was to be expected. “Boys will be boys.” Every PX stocked plenty of GI issue condoms and according to the grapevine, some commanders even went so far as to bus in Vietnamese girls for hire to keep morale high. However, if we wanted to have a relationship, or to occasionally be with a man we cared deeply about, we were not conducting ourselves as “ladies should.” And if we might be unladylike enough to want birth control pills, which were kept in a safe and rarely dispensed, we could expect the wrath of God, or our commander, to descend upon us.<sup>19</sup>

They were also sexually attacked: over half the one hundred thirty-

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17. Samuel A. Stouffer et al. *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*, vol. 2 of *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II*, ed. Samuel A. Stouffer et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 179.

18. Lynda Van Devanter, interview.

19. Lynda Van Devanter, with Christopher Morgan, *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (New York: Beaufort Books, Inc., 1983) 122.

seven former Vietnam nurses surveyed in a Northwestern State University study reported to have suffered sexual harrasment ranging from simple insult to rape. One nurse was offered a Bronze Star to sleep with her commander; another, who was threatened by a patient, was scolded for being “seductive.”<sup>20</sup> One nurse who had gone with friends to a pilots’ party learned the pilots had plans for them:

I said, “Hey, you know there’s a room full of mattresses back there and some of the guys are getting the girls pretty drunk.” There was also a lot of opium and a lot of dope. “We got to get out of here.”

We tried to put up a united front. Those of us who were reasonably sober practically carried the drunk ones to the chopper pad and tried to get someone to give us a ride home. The guys were furious. We thought it was going to be a gang rape, that’s how bad it was. I didn’t think we would make it out alive. The GIs called the nurses round-eye tail, and suddenly that’s exactly what we were. This was the enemy camp.<sup>21</sup>

And on those occasions when their bravery exempted them from categorization as “angel” or “tail,” that bravery could simply be ignored. In *Home Before Morning*, Lynda Van Devanter describes a nurse’s rescue of a wounded man from a flaming helicopter. Afterwards, the head nurse puts in her name for a Bronze Star with a “V” for valor. The star comes, but without the “V” — it cannot, says the Commanding Officer, be awarded to a nurse.<sup>22</sup>

Just as Vera Brittain discovered in 1918 that her devastating experiences as a combat nurse in France made her “merely the incompetent target for justifiable criticism since knowledge of surgical nursing did not qualify me for housekeeping,”<sup>23</sup> women who returned from Vietnam were told that what they had done, seen and felt did not really “count.” Lynda Van Devanter describes trying to join a veterans’ anti-war march:

20. Vincent Coppola, “They Also Served,” *Newsweek*, 12 November 1984, 36.

21. Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc. 1981), 228.

22. Van Devanter and Morgan, *Home Before Morning*, 195.

23. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 430.

When we moved outside to line up, I took a place near the front. However, one of the leaders approached me. "This demonstration is only for vets," he said apologetically.

"I am a vet," I said. "I was in Pleiku and Qui Nhon."

"Pleiku!" he exclaimed. "No shit! I used to be with the 4th infantry. You must have been at the 71st Evac . . . . You folks saved my best friend's life . . . ."

"Do you have a sign or something I can hold?" I asked.

"Well," he said uncomfortably, "I . . . uh . . . don't think you're supposed to march."

"But you told me it was for vets."

"It is," he said. "But you're not a vet."

"I don't understand."

"You don't look like a vet," he said. . . . "You can't be a member of our group. I'm sorry."<sup>24</sup>

Another nurse, who worked at Cu Chi and Danang, got the same message from different sources.

For the past 12 months I'd made decisions about whether someone was going to live or die. I got into this [country] hospital and was told I could not hang a pint of blood unless a doctor was standing there. I kept on getting called in by the head nurse, saying "You've really got an attitude problem. You're no longer in Vietnam." Like, who do you think you are? I went through a severe depression in 1978 and I remember telling the shrink I had been in Vietnam, and he just brushed that over and said "Tell me about your childhood." Just brushed it aside as if it wasn't important at all.<sup>25</sup>

If post-Vietnam America did not want to deal with men who symbolized a lost war, it did not know *how* to deal with women who did not fit into any of women's traditional war-time categories. Women who had spent a year in combat boots and mud and blood-stained fatigues working at or near the front were not clichéd self-sacrificing Florence Nightingales or breathy, flirtatious Hot Lips Houlihans. One name that might have suited them was "soldier" — certainly a woman who

24. Van Devanter and Morgan, *Home Before Morning*, 231.

25. Rose Sandecki, interview with author, 1984.

had worked around the clock in an operating room that was sometimes under fire, numbing her emotions while piecing together burned and mangled bodies, had exhibited strength, courage, endurance, toughness, and lack of squeamishness in large measure. But if being a man was the antithesis of being a woman, and if one proved “real” manhood by becoming a soldier, how could soldiers be anything but “real” men? If going to war was, “for those men trying to fulfill society’s expectations, part and parcel of displaying their male identity and thus qualifying for the privileges it bestows,” by definition, warriors simply *could not be* women.<sup>26</sup> To close the gap between the myth and reality of what women do in war, writes Cynthia Enroe in *Does Khaki Become You?* “. . . would require that military officials resolve their own ideological gender contradictions.”<sup>27</sup> Instead,

women *as women* must be denied access to “the front,” to “combat” so that men can claim a uniqueness and superiority that will justify their dominant position in the social order. And yet because women are in practice often exposed to frontline combat, the military has to constantly redefine “the front” and “combat” as wherever “women” are not.<sup>28</sup>

And if this means that, say ten thousand women will be left with bad dreams and problems they are told they have no right to have, then that is a contradiction they will just have to work out themselves.

In 1984 the VA commissioned an as-yet unreleased survey of some three thousand women veterans. A bronze memorial statue entitled “Nurse” was unveiled in Minnesota. A brief flurry of newspaper and news magazine articles introduced America to its “forgotten vets.” Two Vietnam nurse stories went into Hollywood “development.” And as long as Vietnam remains a “hot” commercial topic, further books, studies and movies-of-the-week about women Vietnam veterans are sure to come.

But whether women’s experiences in Vietnam will ever really become part of the culture, of the remembered history of the war, is far from certain. “Writing women’s history,” points out one writer, “involves much more than digging up some little-known facts; it means

26. Cynthia Enroe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women’s Lives* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 13.

27. Enroe, *Does Khaki Become You?*, 107.

28. Enroe, *Does Khaki Become You?*, 15.

redefining historical categories like war.”<sup>29</sup> And one can’t redefine war to legitimize women’s experiences without confronting its mythical connection to manhood and masculinity. The belief that only war can “make” a man haunts those who escaped service in Vietnam only to suffer “Viet Guilt” (or, more accurately, “Viet Envy”) years later:

Like 17 million other men who came of age during Vietnam, I did not serve in the armed forces. It was a blessing, then, to have escaped; it is a burden now. I find there is something missing in me . . . . Those like me, who, for one reason or another, did not serve, suffer because we chose not to perform a primary and expected rite of passage. We were never inducted, not merely into the Army, but into manhood.<sup>30</sup>

The old belief that war imparts some mysterious masculine knowledge lingers in the minds of women like the writer whose short story was published recently in *Mademoiselle*:

Ellen sees her brother, separated from his unit. She tries to imagine his being ambushed by the two Vietcong in the jungle, as Warren explained matter-of-factly he had been, how they had damaged his spine with his own hand grenade, attempting to set it off between his legs. She cannot, she doesn’t have the words or the understanding, not a metaphor, to describe it to herself. No wonder men seldom spoke in intimacy; the things they needed to air were unspeakable.<sup>31</sup>

And the old belief persists that women can’t know war silences, even women who should know better, women who *do* have the words and understanding and metaphor to describe a man crippled by a grenade. On a recent PBS documentary, one nurse recalled being caught in the rain on a gunboat in Vietnam: “I was thinking,” she said, “this is what *real war* [my emphasis] must be like.”<sup>32</sup>

As long as the old war mythology holds, the experiences of women

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29. Karen Rosenberg, “Peaceniks and Soldier Girls,” *The Nation*, 14 April 1984, 453-454.

30. Edward Tick, “Apocalypse Continued,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 January 1985, 60.

31. Linsey Abrams, “Secrets Men Keep,” *Mademoiselle*, August 1985, 283.

32. Gary Gilson, “A Time to Heal.” St. Paul: KTCA Television, A Twin Cities production, 1985.

in war will never have legitimacy. But a culture of war, especially one that seeks to perpetuate itself, has nothing to gain and everything to lose by changing that mythology and acknowledging the experiences of women Vietnam veterans. To admit that women serve and suffer in war is to destroy the claim to special male knowledge and all the privileges it brings. To admit that women have been in danger and died is to contradict the myth that women need to be protected. Most of all, to hear the stories of combat nurses is to contradict the myth of war's glory itself. "War," writes former Marine and *Newsweek* editor William Broyles, in an *Esquire* article entitled "The Greatest Love of a Man's Life," "may be for men, at some terrible level, the closest thing to what childbirth is for women: the initiation into the power of life and death."<sup>33</sup> Within the mythology of war, a man who kills, who holds "the power of life and death," can imagine himself a god. The woman who knows that in the end war comes down to blood, pain and broken bodies can only remind him that he is not.

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33. William Broyles, Jr. "Why Men Love War," *Esquire*, November 1984, 61.