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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ WOMEN'S STUDIES

A Time Remembered: American Women in the Vietnam War

Olga Gruzhit-Holt
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“It may not have been a popular war and the outcome may have been disastrous, but I’m proud to have been an American soldier serving my country,” says Linda S. Earle, a member of the Woman’s Army Corps during Vietnam, and one of the twenty-seven women included in this often moving oral history. The approximately 30,000 women—all volunteers—that served in Vietnam in military and civilian capacities played critical, if often forgotten roles as nurses, secretaries, recreational directors for the USO and “donut dollies” for the Red Cross. That their heroic work as caregivers and morale boosters be remembered is why this book is important.

Gruzhit-Holt, the author of They Also Served, a highly regarded similarly structured account of women World War II veterans, clearly describes the common circumstances that the women encountered, including unsanitary living conditions, long hours and poor working conditions, along with possible attacks by communist soldiers and sympathizers. Mary Dickinson, an Army nurse, remembers working twelve-hour shifts, six days a week. “There was a constant stream of mutilated bodies… The psychic numbing that occurs when you live in an atmosphere of death and destruction is incredible. We suppressed so much…” Nurse Carolyn Tanaka cannot forget the ravages of napalm as “patients walked off the chopper with their arms outstretched, burned flesh and clothes hanging from their arms, smacking their lips in thirst.” Several of the subjects suffered PostTraumatic Stress Disorder: how they tried for decades to overcome its devastating effects are tales of bravery. Most of these women found some measure of healing at the 1993 dedication of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial and the Women in the Military Service Memorial Dedication four years later.

Fortunately, many of the women enjoyed long, productive careers in the military and out, accumulating world travel, college degrees and promotions in male dominated professions along the way. This despite the need to hide their military records from a frequently hostile, anti-war society.

The most engaging contribution is that of Bobbie Keith, who became an American forces star as the weather forecaster—“the bubbling bundle of barometric brilliance”—for AFVN-TV. Adopting the zany antics of the popular Laugh-In, notably being doused by a bucket of water whenever she predicted rain, she was fondly remembered for her sign-off: “This is Bobbie wishing you all out there a pleasant evening weatherwise, and you know my wishes go with you for otherwise.”

This readable account, filled with poignant vignettes, of twenty-seven women who often paid a high emotional price for their service, is a solid contribution to Vietnam and women studies collections.
KARL HELICHER (November / December 1999)

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