

Vietnam Generation

Volume 1

Number 3 *Gender and the War: Men, Women and Vietnam*

Article 4

10-1989

"I Never Really Became a Woman Veteran Until ... I Saw the Wall": A Review of Oral Histories and Personal Narratives by Women Veterans of the War

Renny Christopher

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Christopher, Renny (1989) "I Never Really Became a Woman Veteran Until ... I Saw the Wall": A Review of Oral Histories and Personal Narratives by Women Veterans of the War," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 1 : No. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol1/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

"I NEVER REALLY BECAME A WOMAN VETERAN UNTIL...I SAW THE WALL":¹ A REVIEW OF ORAL HISTORIES AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES BY WOMEN VETERANS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

RENNY CHRISTOPHER

In the oral history collections *A Piece of My Heart* (Keith Walker, 1985), *In the Combat Zone* (Kathryn Marshall, 1987), and *Nurses in Vietnam: The Forgotten Veterans* (Dan Freedman and Jacqueline Rhoads, 1987), and in Lynda Van Devanter's groundbreaking personal narrative *Home Before Morning* (1983), women who served in the Vietnam war speak out about their experiences. All these works are recent; women veterans of the war held their silence for many years, in part for reasons similar to those of male veterans, and in part because they often did not feel that they were legitimate veterans. Women did not perceive themselves to be "combat veterans," despite the fact that eight nurses and three Red Cross women were killed in Vietnam, and more were injured. The women who speak about their experiences often report that they attempted to talk about Vietnam, only to receive the message that no one wanted to hear about the war. Although many men had similar experiences, the silencing of women veterans is a more complicated process and has a great deal to do with the way in which our society views women and war.

The invisibility of these women, explains Keith Walker, author of *A Piece of My Heart*, has much to do with the attitude of the military: "...according to military policy, women are not supposed to be in life-threatening situations in a war zone, and therefore we have never developed an image of that in our minds."² Oral histories and personal narratives by these women are beginning to create that missing image for us, and to force us to re-examine our notions about women and war. The stories they tell are never comfortable; they go against the grain in an America that is trying to rewrite the war into something that was glorious and romantic. Women's stories of the war contain little romance and no glory.

For all veterans, the process of storytelling is also a process of recovering wartime roles. The men's and women's narratives share many common themes, but women's stories often include a theme of nurturing and caretaking absent from most men's stories. Women often felt that they were supporters of the men, and not participants in the war in their own right. Women in the military often felt that what they were doing was not as important as what the men were doing, and that in

34 VIETNAM GENERATION

addition to their own jobs they also had the responsibility of acting as mother, sister, and girlfriend to male soldiers. Having absorbed the gender role stereotypes of the larger American society, these women expected to submerge their own needs, and to take care of the men, whose role as combat soldiers was valued more highly than that of nurses or other "support" personnel. The dangers women faced, and the fact that nurses were killed and wounded in Vietnam, did not change this perception. Marshall explains, "They were used to being minor characters, even in their own lives."³

The lack of interest in the women who served in Vietnam, and the ultimate indication of their invisibility, is the fact that there are no hard and fast statistics on how many women served in Vietnam: different sources publish different figures, and the army itself is "guarded in its statistics about women who enter any war zone."⁴ The Department of Defense lists 7,500 American military women in Vietnam, but the Veterans Administration lists 11,000 women. There are no official numbers for civilian women, who worked in large numbers for the Red Cross or such organizations as the International Voluntary Services. According to independent surveys, the total number of women who worked in Vietnam during the war is between 33,000 and 55,000.⁵ Kathryn Marshall, author of *In the Combat Zone*, states:

No one seems to have an accurate count. This apparent lack of data on the part of the Department of Defense and the State Department both serves as a reminder of government mishandling of information during the Vietnam War and points to the more general belief that war is men's business.⁶

Eighty percent of women in the military were nurses, but women also served as clerks, air traffic controllers, in the Army Signal Corps, and Military Intelligence. The Walker and Marshall volumes contain the oral histories of two women who worked in non-nursing military positions. Doris Allen, a black career noncom who worked in Military Intelligence in Saigon, predicted the Tet Offensive of 1968. She explains that "a lot of people couldn't believe, or didn't want to believe, that a woman could actually be making decisions or analyses—and their being correct."⁷ The second woman, who worked as a decoder, says that the army "decided that women could carry more mental stress than males, so...they decided to try to get women decoders in the Army Security Agency."⁸

In addition to the American military women working in Vietnam, American civilian women with the Red Cross worked directly with the military in the Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas (SRAO) program. Commonly called "donut dollies," their job was to bring some home cheer to the troops on the front line. Some of the women with the SRAO were "choppered" to heavy combat areas on an almost daily basis.⁹ Civilian women also worked in Vietnam as journalists, and for

UNTIL I SAW THE WALL 35

organizations such as International Voluntary Services (IVS), Catholic Relief Organization, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), American Friends Service Committee, and for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).¹⁰ The oral histories include the stories of some of these women.

All the American women who served in Vietnam were “volunteers.” People who volunteered for service in Vietnam were often criticized after the war; were called “fools” for volunteering. But many women’s stories show that “volunteering” was not always a matter of free choice. They went to Vietnam for economic or moral reasons, or because they had been, from childhood, prepared for service to their country. Lily Adams, an Asian-American veteran, went into nursing in a three year degree program because she couldn’t afford college. When an Army recruiter showed up at her nursing school, she thought “that was the answer to a lot of my needs. Financial for one. And for another, I could fill the needs that I wanted to fill for John F. Kennedy. He really inspired me at an early age....”¹¹ Adams “felt very guilty that the guys had to deal with these decisions—major decisions in their lives—and that girls didn’t. Yeah, I felt very guilty that a lot of guys I knew got drafted and that girls didn’t.”¹² Adams, however, did not realize that she would be going to Vietnam when she enlisted: “...when the recruiter said that women never got sent to Vietnam unless they volunteered, I believed her. That was the first—but not the last—time the Army lied to me.”¹³

Grace Barolet O’Brien also speaks of joining the army for economic reasons:

When I finished the two years at junior college, I wasn’t really sure how I would get the money to complete my education. One day my brother said, “Grace, I think I found the way for you.” He was reading an Army magazine about helicopters, and there was something in it about the Army student nurse program.¹⁴

In a similar instance, Laura Radnor graduated from a three-year nursing program¹⁵ and realized that her education limited her. She explains, “I was still a diploma graduate, so my prospects for promotion were not great....And then one day I saw an ad on TV about wanting nurses in Vietnam.”¹⁶

Career choices were limited for women in the 1960s, as Kay Johnson Burnette explains: “This was still a very sheltered time, and I can remember my guidance counselor saying, ‘What do you want to be, a nurse, a teacher, or a secretary?’ I came from a small town and pretty much took the man’s word. I picked nursing.”¹⁷ Nurse, secretary or teacher? The oral histories make it clear that those three choices were all that were offered to women who wanted to pursue professional careers. Among those who chose nursing were women whose capabilities far exceeded the jobs that their training prepared them to hold. They were bored, and the army provided an economically feasible and challenging alternative.

36 VIETNAM GENERATION

The notion of service figures heavily in the decisions of the women—military and civilian—who volunteered with the specific intent of going to Vietnam. Christine McGinley Schneider, an army nurse whose mother had been a Navy nurse in World War II, says, “Then when you come out of school, you kind of feel like you want to do something to save or help the world.”¹⁸ Cherie Rankin, a Red Cross worker, explains:

I did have a sense that the war was wrong. But I couldn't get away from the feeling that there were guys over there like my brother—guys who grew up with apple pie and country, guys who did what they were told and didn't question it. I didn't want to support the war, but I wanted to support those guys...I wanted to go. I wanted to find out for myself what was going on, and I wanted to help if I could. I also wanted the adventure.¹⁹

No matter what feelings these women had about going to Vietnam, none of them were prepared for what they found when they arrived. Leslie McClusky, an Army nurse, describes her experience:

I was assistant head nurse in a surgical intensive care unit and had had three years of real critical care experience. I'd taken care of a lot of trauma from automobile accidents, stabbings, and things. Little did I know that did not prepare me in the least for Vietnam....The first guy that I saw wounded was a kid who had had his leg blown off. He had shrapnel everywhere, too. I had never seen shrapnel wounds, just like I had never seen a traumatic amputation. You know, I'd seen normal amputations under sterile conditions. But I had never seen a guy with big, black pitted holes everywhere and a makeshift tourniquet over the amputation site. He was conscious, too. A sweet young kid. I had no idea what to say.²⁰

McClusky's experience is representative of the initiations into the Vietnam experience that nurses describe. No matter what their civilian experience had been, the nurses were not ready for the sheer number of casualties, nor the horrible nature of the wounds. Christine McGinley Schneider describes the emotional impact of her own initiation experience:

I had worked a year in the emergency room on the jail ward, but nothing could prepare you for the horrible things you saw....He was a really good-looking boy...with blond hair, and half of his face had been blown away, and the first thing the nurse said to me was, “Cut off all his clothes....” I remember...the horror of taking one of his boots off and his foot still being in the boot....After I drew the blood he said, “Please don't leave me.” I said, “I just have to run across the hall to the lab. I promise I'll be right back.” I was right back, and he had died in the time that I had left him alone....And I never forgot that. I never again left anyone.²¹

UNTIL I SAW THE WALL 37

Civilian women, too, were underprepared. Julie Forsythe, a volunteer in a rehabilitation unit run by the American Friends Service Committee, explains:

I wasn't prepared for a lot of things I saw....But the kids were the worst...because the kids are the ones who take the ducks out and take the water buffalo down to the river. And some yo yo leaves a landmine in the path and—pop! That's it. No, I wasn't prepared for how many kids were so badly damaged.²²

Red Cross workers, like other civilians, were not taught what they really needed to know before they arrived in Vietnam. Many of them describe the experience of coming from sheltered backgrounds and being naive when they entered the Red Cross. Red Cross training consisted mainly of indoctrination into how to be “ladylike,” rather than teaching women to cope with war and soldiers. Cherie Rankin says:

So we went to what I call boot camp in Washington, D.C. There they taught us how to do these programs we'd be doing over there. But we didn't get any political orientation. We didn't get any idea of the realities per se. All we were taught was what our job would entail.²³

Jeanne Bokina Christie puts it another way: “Going over we were all still in la-di-da land....We hadn't the foggiest idea of what we were doing or what we were getting ourselves into.”²⁴

Being underprepared could be extremely dangerous. Lily Adams' plane arrived in Vietnam under heavy fire. The male passengers all hit the deck, and Adams realized she had no idea what to do:

And at that moment I realized that these men were trained to survive in a war zone but that I was not—that I could get killed. And that if I died it was going to be the Army's fault. The Army never taught me anything—I mean anything. Nothing.²⁵

In Vietnam there were no front lines, and some women were frequently exposed to combat situations. In all the oral histories and personal narratives of military and Red Cross women there are descriptions of situations in which they were under fire. Rose Sandeck's story is not an uncommon one: “I remember once in Cu Chi they got us all up in the middle of the night and were really not sure what to do with us because we were being overrun.”²⁶ As “noncombatants,” women were not supposed to carry weapons, but sometimes they found themselves in dire situations. Anne Simon Auger, an Army nurse stationed in Chu Lai, relates the following story:

...my corpsman on the ward was a conscientious objector, so he wouldn't handle any firearms. I remember I had to grab the M-16 and stand guard after I had locked the doors. I didn't even

38 VIETNAM GENERATION

know how to fire the damned thing!...Once again, I had the preconception that women were supposed to be taken care of, and it seemed like I was doing all the taking care of.²⁷

Maureen Walsh, a Navy nurse stationed in Da Nang, saw her corpsman killed as he stood next to her:

Shrapnel came in the door—went right by me, under my legs. Another piece came in as I was counting narcotics for one of the corpsmen at the medicine cabinet next to the door. The shrapnel went through his head, went through the medicine cabinet, exited through the unit on the other side, and lodged in the wall.²⁸

Pinkie Hauser, a personnel sergeant in Long Binh, saw a woman colonel killed by shrapnel in her quarters: "I mean, those things have points on them like needles....It comes to a point and it had this woman pinned in her wall. I guess she was standing up when it came in and she was pinned against the wall with this metal in her."²⁹

Red Cross workers flew out to firebases in helicopters that were often shot at. They also travelled by jeep, and occasionally got caught in firefights. Judy Jenkins conveys the double bind that combat situations placed women in vis-a-vis male soldiers: "The whole time the police chief was firing back—I was lying there on the floor of his jeep—he kept saying, 'What's going to happen to my career if a woman gets killed in my vehicle?'"³⁰ Jenkins goes on to describe her reaction to this and similar experiences:

We women, you know, were noncombatants in a place where we could have gotten killed just as easily as the men. Only we couldn't shoot back. We never had the chance. So what do you do with all your fear and anger? You internalize it. You just absorb it. Because you have a job to do, and that job involves taking care of people.³¹

Jenkins puts forward the paradoxical position of women in the Vietnam war. Women suffered the same dangers as men did, but they were additionally required to serve men selflessly. Their role as caretakers forced them to subordinate their own needs to the needs of others. Though they clearly acted as participants in the Vietnam war, they were only recognized as observers and supporters, assisting men who attend to the "real work" of the war.

Most of the oral histories and narratives contain at least one passage which illuminates this theme. Lt. Col. Ruth Sidisin (USAF, retired) puts the problem of women's participation in the war succinctly:

The gist of it is that I'm so glad they're finally recognizing that there were women over there. And that the women saw as much as the guys did, but in a different way. This should finally end

UNTIL I SAW THE WALL 39

the idea that a woman is supposed to give and give and give, and make everything nice-nice, and be an Earth Mother and console everyone all the time without receiving emotional support themselves. Because if you don't believe women need to be replenished, you're a fool. That kind of thinking is just a bunch of garbage.³²

Unable to officially recognize the service of women in Vietnam because of regulations which required that women serve in noncombat areas, the military maintained the myth that women served a support function and were not really "in" the war. Thus, women who showed courage under fire were never honored for their actions. Lynda Van Devanter tells the story of a nurse who ran back to a burning helicopter to rescue a wounded man, just seconds before the vehicle exploded in flames:

The head nurse in the ER [emergency room] put Coretta in for a Bronze Star with a 'V' device for valor. When it came a month later, it was missing the 'V' device. The head nurse was furious and demanded to know what had happened. She was told by the C.O. [commanding officer] that they didn't award things like that to nurses.³³

Karen Bush, an Army nurse stationed in Pleiku, tells a similar story:

Some of the nurses had wanted to get combat medic badges, not just the medical badge. But in order to do that, you had to spend two weeks on a fire base. So we said we wanted to go out to a fire base to spend two weeks. The administrators said "no" and I asked "Why?" They said, "Well, you might be killed;" and I said, "That's not the reason. What's the reason?" "Well, we don't want you to get captured." They said it would be impossible to negotiate. And that the men wouldn't put up with it because I was a woman.³⁴

The attitude of male soldiers toward female soldiers can give insight into the nature of the male war experience. The experience of war grants men special privileges. They have undergone a rite of passage which is traditionally unavailable to women. It is a measure of our cultural blindness that men serving in Vietnam could not see that some women were taking the same risks and making the same sacrifices as they were. The combat experiences of male soldiers were valorized, and the experiences of female soldiers were diminished or repressed. Masculine images of women in war did not include that of a woman who did a vital job and risked danger herself. Men saw women as being present for male benefit—as caretakers—and not as direct participants in the war. Thus, women's jobs were often forced into the background, while the emotional demands of men took center stage. Rose Sandeck, a former Army nurse and current veterans' activist, explains:

40 VIETNAM GENERATION

You also learned that you became almost like a commodity because you were a woman. After working twelve-hour shifts with all the blood and gore, you would change into a civilian dress to go to one of the local officers' clubs....There would be one guy after another coming up and more or less doing his number on you: "I haven't seen a round-eye in six months. Would you dance with me?" You'd say, "No, I'm tired. I just want to sit and put my feet up." They wouldn't take no for an answer and would play this guilt thing like, "God, you don't know how bad I'm feeling...." If you stayed back in your hooch by yourself or stayed and talked to a couple of the other nurses, you were accused of being a lesbian....³⁵

The dual burden of women soldiers was built into the military system, into the structure of the war itself. Col. Eunice Splawn (USAF, retired) explains her double bind:

I was dating a guy from the Jolly Greens [a helicopter pilot]....When I would get angry at him, I'd want to say, "Hey look—go away and leave me alone and never come back." But I knew that if I really said this and then he went out and got shot down, I'd have to live with the guilt.³⁶

For Red Cross workers, the emotional burden was even more difficult. Though Red Cross rules explicitly stated that sex was not part of the comfort that Red Cross workers were to provide, their role was clearly to cater to the emotional needs of men, to be "mother, sister, girlfriend." Some soldiers believed that it was the duty of these women to cater to their sexual needs as well. Cherie Rankin says: "There were so many rumors. Millions of rumors about the Red Cross women—every guy claimed he had it [sex] with one of us....I did have guys come up to me with money in their hands and say, 'Here—how much are you getting now?'"³⁷

Male expectations could be more than simply annoying; they could be physically as well as emotionally dangerous. Rankin describes her reactions to a situation where she nearly escaped being raped by two American soldiers:

Now here's the conflict: you're supposed to be nice to the guys. You never know if you're the first American woman they've seen, so you always tried to be friendly. So when they stopped again and asked if I wanted a ride, my instincts told me not to get in the truck, but my professional self said, "Now what are you supposed to be doing here in Nam?"³⁸

Rankin's sense of duty as a professional "helpmate" led her to do something that is dangerous, against her better judgment, and in denial of her own self-interest. After a great deal of internal conflict, she decided not to report the incident: "My reason for wanting to report it was so that,

UNTIL I SAW THE WALL 41

if these guys were dangerous, the same thing that happened to me wouldn't happen to another woman. Or to me again....But if they weren't dangerous, I didn't want to do anything to screw up what was already a bad experience for them."³⁹ The fact that Rankin has herself had a "bad experience" does not—cannot, by the rules of the game, enter into her deliberations.

The pattern of subordination of women's needs to men's demands is repeated in contemporary treatment of women Vietnam veterans. After the war, women veterans made no impression on the public consciousness, and were ignored or deprecated by their male peers. Linda McClenahan, a WAC working at United States Army, Republic of Vietnam (USARV) headquarters in Long Binh, had a dream that captures the invisibility of women veterans:

I had a dream that I got on a bus....The door opens, I'm handed an M-16, I step off the bus, and I'm back in Vietnam—and I'm in the middle of a firefight, you know, combat—people are dying all around us...and I got hit!...I saw the helicopters coming to pick us up, and when they did, they picked up everybody but me. They just left me! And I remember yelling, "Don't leave me! I hurt too....Don't leave me! I hurt too!"⁴⁰

McClenahan's dream is a graphic and accurate metaphor for the fate of women Vietnam veterans. Male veterans could find their identities with traditional veterans' organizations, or with Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) if they were antiwar. Women who had served in Vietnam, however, were not welcome in any of these groups. Lynda Van Devanter joined the VVAW when she returned home from her tour of duty. She describes her experience at a demonstration in Washington, DC:

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...." "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."⁴¹

Ann Powlas, a former Army nurse, joined the American Legion, hoping to find other vets to talk to, but her experience has been less than positive:

A few weeks ago at a ball game one of them [the veterans] even asked me if I was using my husband's card. I said, "It says 'Ann Powlas'—how can that possibly be my husband?" And he said, "You're a member of our post?"...The Legion just does not believe women Vietnam veterans are really veterans—the older

42 VIETNAM GENERATION

vets have no respect for any women vets. What they don't understand about Vietnam, though, is that there was no rear—the VC was everywhere, even in the hospitals. But a lot of people feel like, well, if you weren't out in the bush fighting you're not a real veteran. And, for a long time, that was how I felt about myself.⁴²

Some male veterans hid their identity as veterans because public opinion had turned against the Vietnam war. Among women veterans, concealing their military service seems to have been the prevailing trend. Isolated from each other, these women feared disapproval, contempt, or abuse from nonveterans and male veterans alike. Women who had served in Vietnam as civilians were even less likely to be accepted by male veterans, even in the relatively sympathetic environment of the veterans' rap group. Red Cross worker Jeanne Christie went to a rap group with a male veteran friend:

So we opened the door and started to walk in. The team members who were on duty that night got up and started toward us. They pointed at Peter and said, "He can come in but she can't!" I was gone—totally demolished. They had leveled me right there. Fortunately, Peter said, "What do you mean? She was there. She was in Nam."...after a few minutes the team members and the rap group decided to let us stay.⁴³

Christie is completely erased from this scene; she loses the power to speak for herself, and her entrance to the group was secured only after a male veteran spoke for her and attested to her veteran status. Red Cross workers doubted their status as legitimate veterans, and often downplayed their suffering, as Cherie Rankin describes: "I had always minimized my experience in Vietnam. I always told myself, 'Hell, you weren't a guy. You weren't fighting. How can your experience have been so tough? You don't have any right to feel that way.'"⁴⁴ It was only after she became involved in a network of women civilians who had served in Vietnam that Rankin started to call herself a "civilian veteran—something I never felt entitled to call myself before."⁴⁵

Entitlement is an important issue for women veterans, both civilian and military. A strong body of evidence about women's experiences in Vietnam exists in the oral histories and personal narratives that have been published in recent years. Both military and civilian workers served under fire. In the hospitals, medical personnel suffered the trauma of viewing horrible wounds, and of bearing responsibility for making life and death decisions. Red Cross workers wrote last letters home for dying men. Women, like men, were witness to the civilian casualties of the war—especially the wounded children. Women served as caretakers for soldiers, who often unburdened themselves—leaving their surrogate "mother, sister, girlfriend" with a burden of vicarious grief and pain.

UNTIL I SAW THE WALL 43

The picture that emerges from these oral histories about American women in Vietnam is one of almost unrelenting trauma and repression. Many women describe their symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder—emotional numbing, nightmares, depression. The women who tell their stories in these books remained isolated until recently, when they experienced some turning point—the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall in Washington, DC, or the discovery of the story of some other woman vet. Several women describe the experience of coming across an interview with Lynda Van Devanter, or reading *Home Before Morning*. Leslie McCluskey says, “...every time I read a page I’d start to see things and start to cry. I kept saying to myself, ‘I can’t believe this. I can’t believe someone else is feeling the same things I am.’ Because all those years, I’d thought I was the only one.”⁴⁶

The Veterans Administration did not acknowledge that women veterans also suffered from post traumatic stress disorder until 1982, when it set up a Working Group on Women Vietnam Veterans. Shad Meshad, the Vietnam veteran and counselor who pioneered rap groups for veterans, acknowledges that for women, PTSD may be even more acute than for men, “since they usually do not feel free to express their anger and frustration and instead compound the stress by holding in their rage and behaving in an ‘appropriate’ manner.”⁴⁷

Women veterans did not seem to find the women’s movement supportive of their cause, either. Jill Mishkel, a former Army nurse who was stationed at Long Binh, said she “got involved in the Women’s Movement and became a radical feminist. The women in my rap groups all knew I’d been to Vietnam, but we never talked about it—we were too busy talking about the terrible things our mothers did to us when we were three.”⁴⁸ Van Devanter, seeking funds for the Women’s Project of the Vietnam Veterans of America, was told by “one of the foremost women’s groups in the country that women veterans were not enough of a cutting edge feminist issue.”⁴⁹

In the 1980s, the appearances of *Home Before Morning*, oral history collections, personal narratives, newspaper and magazine articles, TV news reports, and *China Beach* have helped to make the image of American women in wartime Vietnam more familiar. Still, as Carol Lynn Mithers points out, the accounts of women veterans “have never really penetrated the public consciousness.”⁵⁰ Mithers claims that women have been excluded from the popular perception of the Vietnam war because while “there has always been a place for women to serve in war...there is not a place for them in its mythology.”⁵¹ Mithers concludes:

To admit that women serve and suffer in war is to destroy the claim to special male knowledge and all the privileges it brings....Within the myth 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.⁵²

44 VIETNAM GENERATION

Though not all male veterans who write about the war find glory in it, some certainly do (not coincidentally, it is more often people of color and working-class whites who write about the war without nostalgia). The appeal of the war for men is reflected in passages such as the following, which is excerpted from Philip Caputo's bestselling memoir, *A Rumor of War*:

I had never experienced anything like it before. When the line wheeled and charged across the clearing, the enemy bullets whining past them, wheeled and charged almost with drill-field precision, an ache as profound as the ache of orgasm passed through me. And perhaps that is why some officers make careers of the infantry...just to experience a single moment when a group of soldiers under your command and in the extreme stress of combat do exactly what you want them to do, as if they are extensions of yourself.⁵³

There are no analogous passages in any of the narratives by women veterans. Women do enjoy the power and competence that their wartime experiences provide, but these pleasures are never removed from the knowledge of the price that is paid by the victims:

I was seeing things, doing things that I never imagined could happen to anyone. I had to do a lot of things on my own, making snap decisions that could end up saving someone or costing him his life.⁵⁴

None of the narratives suggest that women can separate, even for a moment, the sense of personal power that their wartime roles granted them from the cost of the war in terms of human suffering.

Even women who did not become antiwar are terribly aware of the pointless suffering, ugliness, and destruction which is the result of combat. This consciousness is shared by nurses and Red Cross women and comes partially as a function of their jobs, but also as a result of the caretaking role assigned to women by our culture. These women veterans' narratives show us the cultural contradiction produced by women's participation in war—contradictions that forced these women to deny, up until now, their status as veterans. The telling of their stories is an attempt to win the respect now given by American society to their male counterparts. The writing and telling of these stories work to ameliorate the very cultural problem they describe: the silencing and erasure of women. It remains to be seen how successful they will be.

¹ Kay Johnson Burnette, from Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of Twenty-Six American Women Who Served in Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio) 1985: 165.

² Walker: 2.

UNTIL I SAW THE WALL 45

- ³ Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone: Vivid Personal Recollections of the Vietnam War from the Women Who Served There* (New York: Penguin) 1987: 12.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Marshall, 4.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Walker: 253.
- ⁸ Marshall: 8.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 9.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*: 206.
- ¹² *Ibid.*: 207.
- ¹³ Marshall: 207.
- ¹⁴ Walker: 135.
- ¹⁵ Nurses can be certified in a nursing school, which issues a diploma, or they can go to a four-year college and get a Bachelor's degree. The Bachelor's degree is generally considered the more prestigious.
- ¹⁶ Dan Freedman and Jacqueline Rhoads, eds., *Nurses in Vietnam: The Forgotten Veterans* (Austin: Texas Monthly) 1987: 130.
- ¹⁷ Walker: 148.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 37.
- ¹⁹ Marshall: 62-63.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*: 53-55.
- ²¹ Walker: 39.
- ²² *Ibid.*: 171.
- ²³ Marshall: 65.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*: 171.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*: 213.
- ²⁶ Walker: 12.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*: 81.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*: 211.
- ²⁹ Marshall: 46.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*: 131.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*: 132.
- ³² *Ibid.*: 33.
- ³³ Lynda Van Devanter, with Christopher Morgan, *Home Before Morning* (New York: Warner) 1983: 229.
- ³⁴ Freedman and Rhoads: 87.
- ³⁵ Walker: 10.
- ³⁶ Marshall: 100.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*: 69.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*: 68.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*: 70.
- ⁴⁰ Walker: 19.
- ⁴¹ Van Devanter: 271.
- ⁴² Marshall: 125-126.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*: 185.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 77.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 78.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 60.
- ⁴⁷ Virginia Elwood-Akers, *Women War Correspondents in the Vietnam War, 1961-1975* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow) 1988: 212.
- ⁴⁸ Marshall: 144.
- ⁴⁹ Van Devanter: 345.
- ⁵⁰ Carol Lynn Mithers, "Missing in Action: Women Warriors in Vietnam," *Cultural Critique* 3 (1986): 83.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*: 84.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*: 90.
- ⁵³ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine) 1977: 254.
- ⁵⁴ Freedman and Rhoads: 19.