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## Women Home From War

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Sascha Pflaeging

Captain Gabriela Ordonez-Mackey, U.S. Army (detail)

The first time I heard a woman describe her deployment in glowing terms, I was taken aback. Marine Colonel Jenny Holbert told me that being in charge of public affairs for the second battle of Fallujah was "probably one of the biggest events of my life, other than birthing two children." I thought, cynically, that this enthusiasm was all part of her role as a public-affairs officer. It took me a while to understand how compelling the experiences of being in a combat zone could be for the women I talked with. Colonel Holbert's enthusiasm for deployment was only one of many surprises I encountered over the course of the 52 interviews I did with women soldiers, sailors, coasties, airmen, and marines across the eastern seaboard.

In the end, what seems most impressive about the women I interviewed was their capacity for survival: the means they had for balancing their family lives and their military lives and the complex ways they found to keep on going after seeing and experiencing horrific things. A psychologist friend of mine who works with veterans describes going through war as an all-encompassing experience—one that is transformative, life-defining, difficult to leave behind, and almost impossible to

understand for someone who is not part of the same cohort. In today's all-volunteer military, the kinship felt among those who have deployed is magnified by the ways in which the military, as a culture, really is very separate from the rest of the United States.

Sascha [the photographer] and I hope that by coming face to face with women who have deployed, those of us who are outside that culture can begin to get a real sense of how women soldiers are experiencing this long war and how their stories may ripple out and affect the experiences of all American women.

*The text is by Laura Browder, a professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, and the photographs are by Sascha Pflaeging. Both are from the book *When Janey Comes Marching Home: Portraits of Women Combat Veterans*, to be published by the University of North Carolina Press in May. An exhibition of the photographs is at Hollins University's Eleanor D. Wilson Museum through April 17 and will be at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery from May 1 through September 5. For more information and photographs, see <http://uncpress.unc.edu/books/T-9047.html>*