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# The Gray Area: Sexuality and Gender in Wartime Reevaluated

A Thesis By

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Orange, CA

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in War and Society

May 2023

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Mateo Jarquin, Ph.D.

April 2023

# The Gray Area: Sexuality and Gender in Wartime Reevaluated

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Gray Area: Sexuality and Gender in Wartime Reevaluated

by Nat Pendergraft

These three works, two academic papers and one screenplay, challenge traditional notions of gender and sexuality during wartime. Queer Vietnam service members did not all experience oppression, all the time, but rather carved out a space for themselves amongst their peers. Female nurses in the early cold war could keep their careers in the medical field due to its unique gendered history despite demobilization efforts across the country in different industries. Finally, through the medium of historical fiction, a Civil War soldier's fears and desires are questioned as he experiences the phenomenon of the Angel's Glow, a blue light that somehow manifests in the wounds of some soldiers.

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## Project Overview

The gray area of academia is often one that goes under appreciated and under recognized. In this case, the gray area means striking a balance between two polarizing statements, uncovering the nuance therein. It is easy to make broad-sweeping claims seem impressive to a lay audience, even when there is little evidence to support them. This was one thing I finally understood after an illuminating discussion in a class taught by Dr. Jarquin here at Chapman; history thrives amongst nuance and complications whilst other humanities such as political science prefer to keep things separated into neat categories. A political science major I lived with for two years often would get into arguments with me when I challenged her on her very black and white opinions.

Even my personal life dwells in this uncertainty. I began using they/them pronouns my sophomore year of college, something that to this day utterly baffles even the most educated and well-read professors I may encounter. It is difficult to place yourself in a vulnerable gray area with gendered language, but it is important all the same to remain true to your inner identity. This gray area, an area between genders, between traditional conceptions of identity and biology, is a battleground where people's harsh, bisecting opinions blind them to the complexity of reality. The world is never as neat as people want it to be.

As much as I may personally dislike the title of devil's advocate, it is an oft needed role in academic circles. In an endless echo chamber of agreement, nothing gets challenged. Criticism is an essential part of the scholarly process. A good historical work is one that can stand under harsh scrutiny, and a truly great one can take the feedback provided by other experts and improve itself accordingly. The years of work done by scholars before us should be built upon but also

broken down when needed. Historical analysis is not only evaluating evidence but also evaluating the analysis done previously to your own.

During the defense of this thesis, the committee kept reiterating how much time my writing spends in this gray area. Not rebutting the entire historiography of a subject, but rather delving into nuance and adding layers that were not often considered before. This would eventually help me choose the title of the collection, as I finally found the through-line between these seemingly disjointed works. As these three papers were written at three separate times with three different intentions and conclusions, this theme of middle-ground was what I needed to bring it all together.

The rudimentary conclusions that one may encounter in a middle school history classroom cannot be where academics stop their considerations. Across the two academic papers and one creative project contained within this thesis, I strove to challenge the common, popular understandings of gender and sexuality throughout history. Modern day biases largely shape discussions of queer and gender history. It is natural to want to transpose your own view of the world onto people of the past, it helps people to empathize and relate to those who came before them. And yet, this leaves out such wonderful realms of discussion that, to me it seems a disservice to the entire field of LGBT history.

For the first paper in this collection, I discuss the experiences of queer service members who participated in the U.S. military during the Vietnam era. Going into the research, I assumed that queer people had an overwhelmingly negative experience during this time. To queer persons living in modern day, it is natural to view progress as linear. Meaning, if modern queer experiences are bad that must mean that older queer experiences are even worse. However, using



the language of the queer veterans themselves, it seemed almost as though there was an unsung element of joy in this time.

It is extremely important to tell stories of oppression and bigotry, especially how they have shaped our modern world, but is it all there is to tell? It frequently struck me, as I read through the interviews, that these veterans could recall many joyous moments brought about by their queerness. To be seen and understood by other queer people was a euphoria that not many queer rural Americans felt before joining the military in the Vietnam era. The irony here is that the military is mostly viewed as a homophobic, transphobic institution. This is the gray area at work, reckoning the two realities presented to me: queer suffering as well as queer elation.

A majority of the historiography surrounding queer veterans focuses on the oppression they faced. This had distinct political motivation as well, given how many of these works were published around the era of the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy in the U.S. military. By portraying the suffering, yet continued honorable service, of queer veterans, an important argument about the place of LGBT people in the modern military was made. It is not incorrect that queer people experienced great oppression and violence throughout history and persevered in spite of this, but it is not the ultimate conclusion of queer life. Often, with queer stories being solely told as tragedy, many queer people begin to believe that they are destined for sadness within a homophobic society. I wished to cover an area previously unexplored, how the military accidentally served as a nurturing home for many queer people.

The condition of accidental is very important in this context because it is not accurate to say that the military institution wanted to support queer people. In fact, it was largely the opposite, with official rules and persons in charge enacting draconian punishments for those found guilty of homosexuality. It was despite them, often through the creation of a secret

community, that many queer people found where they could be themselves. The small moments of success and happiness that queer service members found were not necessarily standard, but they are nonetheless an important part of the story of the Vietnam era.

It is not enough to only tell stories of queer suffering, but in the same way it is also not enough to only tell stories of queer joy. Queer people and their history deserve nuance and complications and often contradicting experiences that all contribute to a rich story. This is most apparent in fiction, with the prevalence of the Bury Your Gays trope in LGBT media. For a time, the only way to tell a story that featured a queer character was for that character to die tragically in some way relating to their sexuality, but in the modern day it has become tired and irrelevant. Oppression is important to the experience of being LGBT, but it is not the only conclusion.

As the field of queer history continues to grow, it is vital that historians do not solely consider what modern society thinks of queer people. What is considered queer to modern society may have not been in generations past, and vice versa. Language, too, has shifted a significant amount over just a century. The term gay itself was sometimes used in older media to mean happy, and queer meaning odd, a disconnect that is jarring to modern audiences. Queer history depends largely on personal identification of its subjects and a healthy amount of speculation. No historical figure, who did not explicitly state so, can be absolutely proven as queer due to the difference in language, culture, gender roles, and the level of secrecy demanded of many queer people throughout history.

In the same way that LGBT history is shaped by modern biases, so too is that of women's history. This problem of linear progress once again emerges, impressing upon people that the modern day is the best it has ever been for women and that to go backwards in time is to go backwards in progress as well. There are a few key reasons this is not a good way to look at

women's history. If women's history is always examined with the expectation of oppression, there may be distinct moments of equality or progressive attitudes that are overlooked.

The assumption that I brought into my research of the life of Bette Barto was that after World War II, white women returned to the domestic sphere. The temporary period of the Rosie the Riveter working woman ended as soon as it was possible, meaning a return to peacetime. However, this gray area once again appeared, challenging this notion. It is true that many white women did leave their industrial jobs once male soldiers returned home, but it is not the all-encompassing truth. By playing into gender roles, not fighting them, nurses were able to have long careers in the military.

When considering women's history, a scholar must be cognizant of biological essentialism present in the historical record. In the modern day it is understood that a woman is a socially constructed role, but throughout much of the 20th century, a woman was equated to someone who was born with a uterus, vagina, breasts, or any combination thereof. Thus, when I refer to women of the Cold War, I am referring to individuals who considered themselves to be women. Often, this meant they did fit certain physical criteria, but to reduce women to their bodies is reductive and inaccurate. The variances of gender roles throughout history make this distinction important, especially when considering non-European, non-Christian societal structures.

The story of Bette Barto is one that resonated with me deeply. That is simply a part of reading someone's letters to a loved one; exposing yourself to a person's humanity will eventually endear you to them in one way or another. The personal writings of Bette to her parents are an important view of gender and how it impacts language and even life choices. It does little to speculate on what she would have done without the gendered restraints of society, it

is better to instead analyze what she did do, and the societal ramifications of that. There is a natural impulse to feel pity for women of the past, who were regularly denied opportunities on the basis of their gender, but Bette's long career in the military service was one that was enabled due to her gender rather than in spite of it. The gray area in action shows us a woman who was possibly denied the chance at being a doctor or other health professional beyond a nurse, but who also thrived and found great professional and personal satisfaction in the environment she was forced into.

Yet another striking gray area was the career itself. Bette was a medical professional at a time most people associate with housewives married to breadwinners. She and her husband both worked in the U.S. Air Force for the majority of their careers. This was not some radical rejection of gender roles, however, since Bette was a nurse. Nursing earned a special status within the medical field as a role best suited to women, thus allowing many women medical careers without any social stigma. Bette walked the line between traditional woman and experienced Head Nurse in the air force.

For the final piece of this thesis, I have written a 25 page screenplay surrounding the phenomenon known as the Angel's Glow, which happened during the American Civil War. The historical sources I primarily utilized in order to depict the events and characters were the *American Battlefield Trust*, the National Museum of Civil War Medicine, *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* by Timothy B. Smith, and *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* by James M. McPherson. I attempted to stay as true to the historical record as possible, although some liberties had to be taken as always happens in fiction based on truth.

With the creation of any historical fiction, comes the Tiffany Problem. The Tiffany Problem, as coined by Jo Walton, describes the unique issue of believability in historical fiction

amongst general audiences. The title derives from the fact that Tiffany, or Tiffanie or Tiffania, was a common name for girls dating back to the 12th century. But, if a historical fiction writer named a character in medieval Europe Tiffany, the audience would perceive it as inaccurate. This is the struggle between accuracy and believability that haunts many writers even outside of the historical genre.

Frequently, screenwriters use historical bigotry as an excuse to write these stereotypes into their stories. When the television show *Doctor Who* showed Black and Asian people in Victorian London, audiences cried ‘wokeness’ and complained about pandering to modern ideals. Despite the fact that it is very feasible there were plenty of people of different races in London at the time, it did not feel correct to some modern viewers. Thus, many writers argue that they cannot include BIPOC or LGBT individuals in their stories, since audiences pushed back. However, the historical accuracy should not have to bend to fit the whims of the viewer. With appropriate context and explanation, historical fiction can be used to push back on ahistorical narratives that flatten our understanding of humanity.

While writing my script, I had to grapple between strict historical accuracy, what a general audience would believe, and a compelling narrative. Many academics and creatives face the same problems surrounding queer history. One of the largest is language. It is very possible that many people throughout history would have identified as queer in some capacity if they had access to that language and cultural acceptance that many have in the modern day. However, it would be ludicrous to expect historical figures to self-identify using these modern terms. Thus, context and subtext become key. Perhaps a fictional character does not explicitly refer to themselves as queer or transgender, but rather describes their love for persons of the same sex or

gender nonconformity as an inherent part of their individuality. Queer people have always existed, the trouble is simply learning how they considered themselves.

For purposes of this script, the main character Patrick is never explicitly described as gay. I also chose Saint Sebastian to be a part of the script as he has been adopted by many members of the LGBT community to represent coming out as queer to disapproving peers, and rapturous pleasure despite unspeakable pain. However, like Patrick, I never specifically refer to him as queer. This is a decision I made based on years of working with actors, writers, and directors. By writing in a certain interpretation, the script limits itself to a single perspective. I believe this story is important whether or not it is queer, even if I personally intended the character to be gay. Patrick's fears of disappointing his family and the rejection of his peers is something that I believe is something most people can relate to, no matter their sexual orientation.

The true story behind the Angel's Glow is one of medical history, a bioluminescent nematode regurgitating bacteria that can stave off infection in wounds. But, like so many stories in history, this is all known in hindsight. The nematode possibly responsible for the ethereal glow would not be identified until 2001, almost 150 years after the Battle of Shiloh took place. I wished to explore the thoughts and feelings of historical actors in the moment of a strange occurrence. Of course, in a future draft I may include an epilogue explaining the real science behind it, but as it stands I think it embodies the mystery and wonders of our natural world that led so many people to religious faith.

This script too spent ample time in the gray area. So much historical fiction with queer characters focuses on their suffering and overwhelming unhappiness, but Patrick is different. Instead of lifelong anguish, Patrick eventually finds a place for himself amongst his community that may not be perfect, but is still preferable to being fully rejected by his family and friends.

This was the fate for many gay people throughout history, a life of compromise. Historical queer figures did not have the language we now have, so Patrick himself stays in this gray area of knowing he is somehow different but unable to articulate it.

Similarly, the other characters Patrick encounters often represent their own gray area. Saint Barbara is a woman who wields a soldier's rifle, Jack is a Catholic man who does not deny his fiancé agency over herself, Saint Sebastian is a religious figure turned gay icon. I wished for these characters to each challenge a preconceived notion the audience may hold, to show that humanity is complicated and messy. While it is easy to write fictional characters that live up to their stereotypes, it is much more interesting to challenge an audience and yourself by creating characters that break the mold and invoke their own existential dilemma.

The world of historical fiction is one that I personally view as underdeveloped. The gap between artist and scholar is one often left unconnected, but I believe that the intertwining of the two roles will make both fields even stronger. Often it is historical fiction that brings people to the study of history, and I believe in the educational power of art. By creating fiction that is not only based on history but is also shaped to help dispel misinformation and educate the general public, film and television can be a force for great good within the realm of history. So much of history is misunderstood, and entertainment media is one of the fastest ways for anyone, regardless of education, to digest complex historical topics disguised as plot devices and character growth.

Over the course of five years in the history department here, I feel that it is only fitting to have constructed these three unique projects as my final act. I held a double-major during my undergraduate years between history and the film school, helping me realize the similarities and differences between the two fields. The best stories I have heard all come from history. Things

that my film professors would call unrealistic happen constantly through recorded history. Some of the best art is made by drawing on true stories

What it all comes down to is story-telling. Historians and filmmakers both weave intricate stories for their respective audiences. Tone and intent vary wildly, but the humanity at the core of it all, the strange events that draw a crowd, and the emotional connections that can be made at even the harshest moments are things that both history and film rely upon to shape their work. Humanity deserves to be complex, to be portrayed within this gray area between stark right and wrong. The gray area is more than just an academic concept, but a way to view the world and to understand others.



# Intricate Rituals - Service in the Vietnam Era for Queer Individuals

## Introduction

The 1981 work *Untitled* by Barbara Kruger, a 20th century American feminist artist, features a photograph of men engaged in a physical fight, with a text overlay saying, “You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men.”<sup>1</sup> Her work criticized homophobic and hyper masculine culture that pushed men to extreme lengths to justify touching one another without appearing gay. The military, in many ways, is one of the most intricate rituals of all. Men celebrating their maleness, purposefully excluding women, and being put into life threatening situations that make them desperate for intimacy and comfort. What was the queer experience in Vietnam? I argue that the framework of the military seems to cater to queer experiences, and the Vietnam war specifically was the perfect storm of newfound social acceptance of homosexuality and a desperation for manpower in the military. Vietnam’s placement in history, the simultaneous Gay Liberation Movement and the dire need for soldiers, made it a place for queer members to perform their intricate rituals, despite efforts to keep queer people away from the military entirely.

The phrase “intricate rituals” became popular in online circles in late 2018, mostly for fans of pop culture with an often unintentional queer subtext. It became shorthand for any homoerotic undertones, a way to quickly identify something as an elaborate way to explain possible homosexual behavior as undoubtedly heterosexual. These intricate rituals are not hard to find, with many heterosexual men, insecure in their masculinity, still more willing to arm wrestle than to hold hands. Similarly, the notorious act of hazing new members of a college fraternity,

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (You Construct Intricate Rituals)*, 1981, photograph.

often through sexually humiliating acts, can also be interpreted as latent homoerotic impulses expressing themselves through intricate rituals.<sup>2</sup> The military continues to lend itself to these rituals, despite its outwardly homophobic culture. Sharing small living spaces with other men and being put into highly stressful situations has led many male soldiers to pursue emotional and sexual intimacy with one another for centuries.<sup>3</sup> Seeing queerness as an element inherent to the military rather than the exception to it is key to normalizing homoerotic interactions. Many are still reluctant to accept the fact that men's desire to win the approval of fellow hypermasculine men, as encouraged by society, is inherently homoerotic.

Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) was a military policy introduced by the Clinton administration in 1993 that theoretically lifted the ban on homosexual military service but it actually forced queer personnel into secrecy and silence. It ended the witchhunt element that had dominated previous LGBT policies but still allowed the military to discharge service members for their sexuality. The policy also had a substantial effect on academic as well as public discourse, inspiring many scholars to seek out historical examples of queer service members. Such individuals, with Randy Shilts and Steve Estes being the most prolific, published their works seeking to dispute the argument that had enabled DADT; namely that the presence of queer soldiers undermines the cohesion and efficacy of the military.<sup>4</sup> In order to dispute this argument, these works focused on stories of queer service members who bravely served their country despite the discrimination and hate they were forced to endure. Shilts and Estes rely heavily on personal anecdotes from queer veterans that focus almost entirely on prejudice.

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<sup>2</sup> John Hechinger. *True Gentlemen: The Broken Pledge of America's Fraternities*. Public Affairs, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bronski. *A Queer History of the United States*. Beacon Press, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Estes. *Ask & Tell: Gay & Lesbian Veterans Speak Out*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Randy Shilts. *Conduct Unbecoming: Lesbians and Gays in the U.S. Military, Vietnam to the Persian Gulf*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

While this is an important element of the history, it is not all that needs to be discussed. Framing queer history as solely a struggle to overcome adversity does a disservice to the vast array of different experiences of queer service members. Queer history cannot only be discussed in terms of the struggle for equality and suffering in a homophobic society. Queer joy should be given equal weight to queer suffering, for both shape the community and the history. The narrative that being queer is inherently dangerous and painful only supports the homophobic ideal that queerness is bad and something to be wary of. Queerness has always existed amongst humans and some queer people throughout human history have lived happy, full lives as themselves.

The works of Shilts and Estes fall into common tropes that unfortunately cater to the idea of the perpetually oppressed queer person. Being able to reconcile the subcategory of queer history with the more general public understanding of history is key to normalizing LGBTQ life and experiences. The military especially, with its entrenched homophobia and hypermasculinity, is an important site for this discussion as it almost exemplifies toxic masculinity. Beyond normalization, it is simply more accurate to not enter research with the bias that all queer people will face horrible, unstoppable oppression. If a researcher expects to only find negative stories, then that is what they will seek out and ultimately analyze.

A contrasting approach to LGBT history comes from Jacqueline E. Whitt's historiographical article on queer American military history. She emphasizes the fact that military history cannot be understood in the absence of queer history and the importance of mainstreaming LGBTQ history, "[Queer history] is not ancillary or tangential. Military historians must understand the organization of power and hierarchies related to sexualities and genders within military culture, environments, and institutions as military history. Queer history is

military history. Military history is queer history.”<sup>5</sup> Lisa Duggan’s article “The Discipline Problem” complements Whitt’s analysis by discussing how the history of marginalized groups is often understood solely through the lens of oppression. Many traditional historians view sexuality as an anomaly rather than a central factor in the function of social hierarchies and political institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Published a few years before the implementation of DADT, Allan Bérubé’s landmark work *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* was one of the first and best researched looks into the queer experience in the WWII era U.S. military. Using letters, interviews, and now-declassified military documents, Bérubé argues that the relationship between the military and queer citizens transformed policy and culture alike. Instead of a narrative of pure oppression, Bérubé tells the story of queer individuals with agency, who pushed back against homophobia and sometimes even won.<sup>7</sup>

Using the framing of Whitt, Duggan, and Bérubé, I seek to analyze queer experiences from the Vietnam era. In particular, I will argue that rather than being an exclusively oppressive environment for queer service members, the military itself thrived on homoerotic rituals that allowed heterosexual service members to participate in a larger queer story. I will also argue that queer service members consciously chose to join the military to improve their personal circumstances even knowing the limitations they would face. Finally, I argue that Vietnam coincided with other key domestic political events, specifically the Stonewall Riots and the subsequent Gay Liberation Movement, that allowed it to become the laboratory for a new, queer military culture.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacqueline E Whitt, “Queering American Military History,” *International Journal of Military History and Historiography* 1, no. 29 (2021).

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Duggan, “The Discipline Problem,” *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 180.

<sup>7</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1990.

The Vietnam War was unique in the history of LGBT servicemembers for two key reasons. First, it coincided with the beginning of the Gay Liberation movement in the United States. The Stonewall Riots, considered by queer historians such as Michael Bronski in his work *A Queer History of the United States* (2011) to be the start of the gay rights movement, happened in the summer of 1969, roughly the middle of the American conflict in Vietnam. The Gay Liberation movement marked the first time in American history that queer rights were a common household discussion, and further, when many more people were open to the idea of queer people living openly as themselves.<sup>8</sup> Second, the war in Vietnam saw the US military unusually desperate for manpower, meaning the military was unable to be as selective with its members as it may have liked to be.

The infamous and controversial Project 100,000, where the Pentagon lowered the standards for military recruits so that more people could enlist, was the result of a dire need for more service members. Shilts argues in *Conduct Unbecoming* that this desperation for workers weakened the enforcement of the policy surrounding gay service members. In a situation where military officers were already understaffed, they were more willing to look the other way if allegations of homosexual behavior were brought up. This, combined with the simultaneous Gay Liberation movement happening in the United States, created an incredibly unique and surprisingly hospitable environment for LGBT service members.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a series of incredibly important and influential organized social movements within the United States, including second wave feminism, Gay Liberation, the Black Panther Party, and many others. Second wave feminism and Gay Liberation were both forever changed by the introduction of the birth control pill since, “the major moral, scientific, and legal argument against homosexual activity had always been that it does not lead to

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<sup>8</sup> Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 206.

reproduction and is thus unnatural.”<sup>9</sup> The birth control pill enabled people to argue that sex and reproduction were separate. The Gay Liberation movement and the Vietnam war were inseparable rhetorically for activists of the era, with many comparing the bodily autonomy denied consenting queer adults to bodily autonomy denied soldiers killed or wounded in combat; movements of the 60s put special importance on total personal control over one's body, especially in situations of violence, sex, or drugs.<sup>10</sup>

To answer my research questions, I have consulted three oral history interviews with queer Vietnam veterans, Nathaniel G. Butler, Richard D. Williams, and Carolyn Dusty Pruitt. I have chosen oral history as my method for this research because it elucidates specific experiences and opinions of historical figures in a way that official government documents or other primary sources could not. The focus of this research was not how officers and other high ranking military officials viewed their queer subordinates, but rather how those queer subordinates navigated and experienced the world of the military. Each interview covers the person's personal history on how and why they joined the military and details their experiences in the Vietnam era as a queer service member. Contrary to the oppression narrative outlined by Estes and Shilts, these stories were overwhelmingly positive, with all three interviewees speaking highly of their time in the military and what it did for them as an individual, but of course, this does not undercut the discrimination they undoubtedly faced during their service.

In using oral history interviews as a historical source, there are many factors to consider. One of the largest elements of the interview is distance from the event itself, given how time can often warp a person's perception of a historical event they were present for. These interviews were conducted roughly thirty years after the Vietnam era, possibly affecting the accuracy of the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 207.

participants' memories. Further, there is the question of the interviewer and their questions. A biased interviewer and biased questions can lead the participant down certain paths, neglecting others.

These oral histories were conducted by the U.S. Library of Congress, as a part of their Veterans History Project. This project, started by Congress in 2000, has a plethora of experts and funding behind it. Thus, they have strict standards for the questions posed to participants in the collection. By using general, open questions, these interviews largely consisted of what the veterans themselves thought of and wished to talk about, rather than an agenda of the interviewer or project. With its prominent status in the world of veteran history, and access to government funds, these archives are well-vetted and managed by some of the most qualified individuals in the country.

In regards to memory, some accounts simply have to be taken with a grain of salt. Due to the politicization of both queer service members and the Vietnam War more generally, it is very possible that these stories are different from what they would have been ten years prior. This is not to say they are not useful sources, since first-hand accounts offer crucial glimpses into historical events. Certain biases, past and present, must be considered when evaluating the accuracy of personal testimony in regards to historical records. The fact that these veterans do not recount any instances of violence towards themselves or their fellow queer service members does not mean that it did not happen, but instead perhaps they themselves had no experience or did not wish to share these personal stories with a virtual stranger. Offering up one's own life for examination by academics is no easy task.

## **Interview with Nathaniel Butler**

Nathaniel Glover Butler served in the US Navy from 1968 to 1972, working in non-combat roles for his entire career. His interview with the Library of Congress was conducted in 2003 by Marcie Hebert and features a candid account of his experiences in the Navy as a gay man. Specifically, he discusses the complexities of having an intimate relationship with a fellow service member, one who had a wife at the time. Butler eventually requested transfer in order to get away from this man since he had fallen in love with a supposedly heterosexual man, and was subsequently stationed in Vietnam. Though this experience was undoubtedly very challenging, Butler puts special emphasis on what his time in the military meant to him.

It was a positive experience for me overall, I would say, quite a positive experience. You know, I do feel strongly about the gay issue, that gay people should be able to serve openly in the military. I feel very strongly about that. But I also feel very strongly that, without being sappy, that we live in a wonderful country, and we have a responsibility back to the country.<sup>11</sup>

Even as a gay man reflecting back on his tumultuous time with the US Navy, Butler insists that he had a positive experience, and that more people should serve the federal government in some form. The pros outweighed the cons to Butler, his identity as a gay man did not conflict with his identity as a service member, but rather reinforced it and made it stronger.

Just weeks before Butler was honorably discharged in 1972, Butler recalled going to a bar with other military officers, one of whom was considering paying a female sex worker for her services. The officer encouraged the sex worker to approach Butler and grope him, but when he showed no physical sign of arousal she returned to the original officer and noted it was strange that he did not seem attracted to her. This incident, Butler said, must have seemed strange to people, but given that it was so close to the end of his service, he wasn't worried about it being

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<sup>11</sup> Nathaniel Glover Butler, interview by Marcie Hebert, April 2, 2003, Nathaniel Glover Butler Collection (AFC/2001/001/05878), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.



reported. This rather obvious sign of Butler's queerness was not dwelled upon by his peers but seemingly quickly dismissed in favor of keeping the peace and celebrating the end of Butler's service.

Butler had known about his attraction to men since before he joined the military but said that he continued to fight against the idea that he was gay, even hiring a female sex worker in Bangkok to see if he could convince himself to become interested in women sexually, saying "It just, it's not my thing. It just didn't...I mean, it worked, mechanically, physically, it worked, but it just didn't feel right to me."<sup>12</sup> However, he stated that the military did not have a huge effect on his ability to come out or to accept his sexual orientation, "I think maybe, the Navy kept me from being openly gay for two or three years more than I would have been otherwise." Instead, he said his hesitation was more due to the values of the time period than a product of his military service.

Butler recalled an incident during his service where, in what he called a drunken stupor, he watched another male service member, whom he found physically attractive, undress through a screen. However, he was caught by a base patrol officer in that compromising position and asked to give an explanation. He excused the voyeurism by blaming it upon his drunkenness, both to the patrol officer and then later to his commanding officer a few days later when asked. As far as Butler was concerned, that was where the matter had ended.

However, in the years following his discharge, he learned from someone he had served with that someone had speculated that this occurrence meant Butler was gay, but his commanding officer had dismissed the investigation and nothing happened. Hypothetically, Butler could have been dishonorably discharged for homosexual tendencies if this had been investigated, but he claimed that the reason he was not investigated was because the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

commanding officer was fond of him. Shilts, in *Conduct Unbecoming*, argues that military officers during Vietnam often had no choice but to be lax with the enforcement of the policy on queer members because of manpower shortages. The US Military was desperate for people who were competent and willing to serve, and it is incredibly likely that Butler was spared an investigation into his sexuality and a possible dishonorable discharge because of this need.

Service in the Navy comes with a plethora of queer stereotypes, but not without reason. Being essentially trapped on a boat for extended periods of time with only your fellow male officers and denied any heterosexual contact means that people throughout maritime history often turned to queer intimacy, typically framed as a last resort. Thus, these allegedly heterosexual men must make elaborate excuses, or develop intricate rituals, for these non heterosexual interactions. The US Navy is often known as the queerest branch of the military, built upon decades of stereotypes about men on boats together.

One of these rituals, as recalled by Butler, is the Line-Crossing Ceremony, or “Order of Neptune,” that occurs when sailors cross the Equator for the first time. Though Butler did not participate himself due to the time in which he joined the USS *Ticonderoga*, he was aware of the odd nature of this ceremony, calling it a “mild kind of hazing.”<sup>13</sup> According to Carie Little Hersh’s paper “Crossing the Line: Sex, Power, Justice, and the US Navy at the Equator,” this ritual has been conducted upon sea vessels for hundreds of years. Those who had not crossed the equator before, called “pollywogs,” are typically forced to do degrading tasks or perform flamboyantly at the whim of those who have crossed before, the “shellbacks”.<sup>14</sup>

While Hersh argues that cases where sailors were forced to perform simulated sexual acts or put on feminine clothes or costumes are indicative of the sexism and homophobia prevalent in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Carie Little Hersh. “Crossing the Line: Sex, Power, Justice, and the US Navy at the Equator.” *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 9 (2002): 277-324.

the Navy, I do not believe that to be the full story. This is the epitome of the intricate ritual; men fabricating reasons to be intimate with one another. These sailors, most likely isolated from women for months at a time, are driven to enact this ceremony partially in order to excuse any homosexual desire or confusion. Tradition, as well as boredom, are also large factors in the continuation of this ceremony, but the sexual and flamboyant aspects of it are an undeniable indication of the underlying homoerotic tension.

Butler's interview took place in 2003, meaning that even though the main subject was his service in Vietnam, the topic of Don't Ask Don't Tell was still brought up. Butler said he strongly opposed the policy, arguing that queer service members should be able to serve openly. Responding specifically to people who argued it could disrupt morale and undermine military efficacy, he said:

I think that that is such a, a, a horrible argument. That is crap, that's just bullshit. People in the military obey orders. That's what the whole hierarchy of the military is about. If you don't obey orders there are very serious bad consequences, and what ought to be punished is inappropriate sexual behavior. If a straight person is inappropriately approaching another straight person sexually, they should be punished. If a gay person is inappropriately approaching another straight or gay person, they should be punished. It's the behavior that should be punished. The orientation should be totally neutral.<sup>15</sup>

The criticism here is not one of military culture, but rather of those who do not understand it. Civilians and politicians, the ones voting for and drafting legislation related to queer members of the military, often have no military experience of their own, and Butler said that this lack of knowledge of how the military functions is the reason they think that gay people are dangerous for the military. Butler's own overwhelmingly positive experience in the military is evidence that queer people do not always have to suffer as a member of the military, and he clearly thinks that the military itself is not hostile to queer people. If people could consider the

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<sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Glover Butler, interview by Marcie Hebert, April 2, 2003, Nathaniel Glover Butler Collection (AFC/2001/001/05878), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

orientation as neutral, as Butler said, then sexual misconduct can still be punished appropriately and queer people can be allowed to serve openly in the military.

## Interview with Richard D. Williams

Richard D. Williams was a member of the United States Air Force from 1974 to 1998 after growing up in an army family. When he decided to join the intelligence division of the military, he was asked if he was a homosexual and Williams identifies this as the first time he lied in order to continue his service. He did not enter the air force knowing he was gay, but said that the exposure to other queer service members helped him to recognize his own sexuality.

I realized after...in the very first assignment, I started meeting other gay people and if you remember the late or mid 70s were a very liberal time, so there were a lot of gay guys, at least in my experience in the air force. Even though it wasn't legal to be in and they weren't openly gay, but um...very similar, I think, to other people's experiences, there was always an underground network of gay people, every assignment I ever had, and always had lots of gay friends and lots of mentors that were older with that experience.<sup>16</sup>

Not only did Williams come to terms with his sexuality because of the people he met in the service, but he also found a supportive community of queer people that was specific to the air force. The military brings together people of all different backgrounds and identities, creating a diverse environment that allows individuals of certain groups to find one another. Since Williams said his family was conservative, it would be unlikely he would have that same experience if he had not joined the military and thus been exposed to so many different people. Being stationed in Georgia, typically a culturally conservative region, he was surprised to meet so many other queer people that allowed him to process his own sexual orientation.

Even beyond the United States, Williams found that the military allowed queer people to find each other. While stationed in Italy on a five year NATO assignment, he met many other gay men, both military and civilian. Sometimes his fellow soldiers were from countries where queer people were allowed to openly serve, meaning they did not have to keep themselves in the closet.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Dean Williams, interview by David Quick, Richard Dean Williams Collection(AFC/2001/001/87499), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

Williams calls this a turning point in his life, that getting to be around and get close with other queer people who were openly themselves and still serving in the military made him feel more personally comfortable with his sexuality. The institution of the military not only allows fellow queer Americans to find each other, but also to connect with a larger international LGBT community.

Williams elaborates on the secret community of queer people, discussing how they looked out for one another and used their roles in the military specifically to help other queer people.

It'll sound strange but it was a little bit of a gay mafia, you know, if you knew you might be going to Vanderberg you'd ask around and say hey, who do you know at Vanderberg who's gay, what's this boss like. Or, if somebody, you know, I had a friend who was an assignment officer and he would help fellow gay people get assignments and it's no different from someone who's, you know, whatever. You know, women helping women, you know whatever kind of...you help your peers.<sup>17</sup>

Queer people in the military had a legitimate form of comraderie that allowed many of them to have successful careers within a traditionally conservative institution. Being queer was not exclusive to lower rank service members, as many high ranking and highly decorated officers of the time were also queer. Many of them used their influence in whatever way they could to help their fellow queer individuals, working to make the military a hospitable place for them. This community was specific to the military and, while it had to be kept secret, it was incredibly influential in the lives of queer service members.

One of the jobs Williams had during his military service was being a nuclear missile operator in rural Wyoming. He would go into a bunker with a fellow officer for days at a time waiting for the command to launch a nuclear strike. At the time this division was entirely men, meaning Williams would be in a secluded bunker behind a blast door with a fellow male officer.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

This security and isolation would be perfect for secretly queer service members to have intimate experiences with one another, and according to Williams there were plenty of gay men he knew in his time there. The ritual present here is that being forced into prolonged cohabitation with someone relieves the participant of any blame for homosexual experiences that happen during their isolation. Surely, if they had been with women, they would have chosen them over their comrades.

In his last year there, the military was just starting to incorporate women into the service, leading to a lot of controversy about the idea of a man and a woman being in the bunker together. At first, the crews were divided by gender, meaning a man could only be partnered with a man and vice versa, but this system quickly proved to be unsustainable. The military conducted a study and asked the wives of enlisted men what their thoughts on that matter were. When a military wife brought up the concern she had about her husband having sex with a female officer in the secrecy of the bunker, a general from strategic air command asked her, “What makes you think he’s not doing that with another man?”<sup>18</sup> This blunt statement was surprising for Williams to hear, as he knew the reality of the situation was that men did in fact have sexual contact with one another in the bunker. Yet another intricate ritual is displayed here; service members were given the opportunity to have homosexual experiences due to specific and complicated protocols that the military not only allowed but strongly enforced.

While of course Williams encountered bigoted officers who targeted him because of his sexuality, his sexuality was never officially investigated. His safety was not only discretion and luck, however, as he maintained that many people he worked for were perfectly fine with him being gay.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

I've had some very supportive bosses, I have four star generals I worked for who know I'm gay, couldn't care less, who still support me, who still do things for me, and their spouses. You know, support things, you know, letters of recommendation or those sorts of things. In some ways it was hard being gay in the military, but in a lot of ways it was not. I always had a support network, I always had a group of friends, albeit underground and secret, who would help me and give me advice, older guys who, or women, who, you know, would help each other and give you support, don't quit, it's not worth it.<sup>19</sup>

Williams' experience firmly supports the argument that the military was a refuge for queer individuals. Later in his life, after his military service, Williams was surprised to find that gay service members who met up to get coffee each month were frequently higher ranking. He admits he would expect more enlisted men to be openly gay before the ban on LGBT service members was lifted as they had less to lose, but there were more officers than enlisted guys, and many were in long term relationships. Commanding officers being open to queer service members and queer people having lucrative careers with the military is not the popular image of being gay in the military during Vietnam, but it is the true experience for many who served, including Williams.

Williams himself joined the military voluntarily, primarily for financial reasons, but said his brother was a draft dodger who burned his draft card. The draft became a curious phenomenon within queer military communities, because it would have been incredibly easy for queer men to announce their homosexual tendencies in order to escape the draft. All people entering the military had to state that they were not nor had ever been a homosexual, so queer people had a quick excuse to avoid service. Many straight men used this tactic, claiming homosexuality in order to not be sent to Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> For a gay man to serve, this meant that they were either unaware of their own queerness at the time of entry or they wanted to be in the military to the point that they were willing to lie and keep their sexual orientation private. The

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Bronski. *A Queer History*, 197..



fact that some gay men refused to use an easy excuse to dodge military service in the Vietnam era speaks to their commitment to serve and the possible belief that the military could improve their lives even as gay men.

After he retired from the military, he realized he still wanted to work in the federal government so he took a position with the department of defense, doing similar work to his time in the military but now as a civilian. At the time of the interview, he worked in commemorating veterans through museum exhibits and other organizations. Williams expressed his love for that federal work and his desire to make the current government more hospitable to its gay employees. William's service is strong evidence that during the Vietnam era the military was surprisingly welcoming to queer service members, that queer individuals could have successful careers in the military not just in spite of their sexuality but in concert with it, and that the liberal atmosphere of the 1970s was what allowed this environment to be cultivated. Even outside of the stereotypically queer U.S. Navy, the rituals persist.

## Interview with Carolyn Dusty Pruitt

Carolyn Dusty Pruitt served in the US Army from 1971 to 1976, working in training and recruitment. Her interview, conducted in 2005 by the Library of Congress, covers her life from her early childhood in rural Texas to her life as a lesbian Christian minister once she left active service. She joined the military because it offered unique jobs for women:

My friends, my male friends, they got management positions and stuff, but I got ah, my question was, "Can you type?" and "How many words per minute?" So the army looked like a pretty good place to have a nontraditional career without all the trappings, too much of the trappings of the sexist stuff that was going on at the time in Texas.<sup>21</sup>

Pruitt's view of the military as a place to escape from traditional gender roles made it especially important to her life as a queer woman, specifically. According to Christine Laura Beck, queer women typically feel disconnected from the concept of femininity because it is so intertwined with the concept of heterosexuality in society.<sup>22</sup> If a woman feels no attraction to men, then what ties her to the traditional role of a homemaker, housewife, or otherwise traditionally feminine person?

The phrase intricate rituals typically refers to men, for whom violence is more acceptable than intimacy. However, there are key differences when considering the status of queer women. Instead of ironic or violent, homosexual intimacy must be framed as platonic, or for male attention. The rituals perpetuated by queer women were largely the charade of future interest in men, the idea that they were working now but would one day settle down, marry a man, and have children.

Pruitt acknowledged that the "good ole' boys army," as she calls it, had sexism inherent in its structure, but also claims that it was not *as* sexist as the general public at the time. Thus,

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<sup>21</sup> Carolyn Dusty Pruitt, interview by Steve Estes, January 12, 2005, Carolyn Dusty Pruitt Collection (AFC/2001/001/43222), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>22</sup> Christine Laura Beck, "Lesbian Body Dissatisfaction: The Roles of Gender Identity, Body-Gender Identity Incongruence, and Internalized Appearance Ideals," PhD diss., (University of Tennessee, 2017).

after graduating from Stephen F. Austin State University, Pruitt decided her best option was to join the army. She got a direct commission and joined the Women's Army Corps in the last years of its existence, working as a member of the Field Training Committee, teaching basic survival skills, and then worked as a recruiter. Pruitt used her position as a recruiter to help other women find non traditionally feminine jobs.

There was a period of time there that they took single women with children and I would say to them, "Maybe you might want to look into this heavy equipment operator job that we have here." Because I was thinking to myself, "Your job as a secretary is going to pay you, at that time maybe \$300 bucks a month, but if you go into this heavy equipment operator thing, you could make \$800 bucks a month. You know, and that's a lot of difference for a single woman trying to feed a kid. And so, that was my pitch. It was the whole feminist, "let's get them into a nontraditional job" thing. And, it worked; for the most part there were people who went into surveying, there were people who went into heavy equipment operations, the engineer corps, all kinds of things they would never have thought about, probably, if I hadn't said "let's look at this list of jobs that might be open."<sup>23</sup>

The military position Pruitt had allowed her specifically to serve women in her community, possibly aiding other queer women who did not wish to enter a traditionally feminine space, or even just women who needed more money in order to support themselves or their family.

After meeting other queer individuals in college, Pruitt eventually came to the conclusion that she was a lesbian. She had trouble reconciling her Christian faith with her sexual orientation, until she encountered another woman in the army who attended a church that catered to LGBT Christians. This person brought Pruitt a tape of preachings by Reverend Troy Perry, the queer founder of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). This church focused its outreach on LGBT individuals and would eventually be the organization that Pruitt herself joined after attending seminary following her service.

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<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Dusty Pruitt, interview by Steve Estes, January 12, 2005, Carolyn Dusty Pruitt Collection (AFC/2001/001/43222), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

For this coworker to bring this material into the office, the tapes as well as Perry's autobiography *The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay*, was an extremely brave act. Neither she nor Pruitt ever faced any consequences for this and, in fact, Pruitt said that the book was surreptitiously passed around the Women's Army Corps office for about half a year before ending up back on the desk where it began. The preachings of an openly gay Reverend clearly spoke to these women who had entered the army; whether it was because of their own queerness or because of his inspiring story, it is hard to say. But this impromptu book club, as the interviewer called it, was a clear indication of the sheer amount of incognito queer women working with Pruitt. She even went on to say, "it was amazing the number of lesbians who were there at the time!"<sup>24</sup> It was clear that the amount of queer women serving in the army was disproportionate to other occupations at the time, even in the 1970s in Texas where Pruitt was stationed.

It is not difficult to decipher why so many queer women were drawn to federal work. Along with Pruitt's desire for a traditionally unfeminine career, which resonates with a lot of other queer women, was the financial aspect. Queer women who did not wish to marry a man often had few options in terms of a stable job, given gender discrimination in hiring and pay. These women, much like Pruitt, often found that their best option was to get a job working for the federal government. This could allow them to live comfortably without the financial support of a husband and also offered other benefits such as a pension and reliable health insurance. The link between queer women and federal work has been long established, so it is unsurprising that Pruitt encountered so many other queer women in her work in the army. Even with the underlying and oftentimes blatant homophobic rhetoric, queer women continued to be drawn to federal work throughout the 20th century and into the present.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Pruitt maintained that the army was a great place to experience diversity on a larger scale than most rural Americans had access to. She spoke specifically of racial diversity due to the large number of Black draftees, the Vietnamese people that had either immigrated or were working closely with the army, and, “all kinds of religion and cultures, everything kind of gets thrown together in a salad bowl that's the Army.”<sup>25</sup> This diversity was good, Pruitt said, as it allowed her to gain access to perspectives and backgrounds different from her own. For most rural Americans, the main opportunity to meet others from diverse backgrounds was to attend college, but for those who could not or did not wish to attend college, the military was another option. While she does not deny the military’s culture of racism and sexism, Pruitt’s view of the Army is that it gives people the opportunity to expand their worldview and learn about the cultures and values of different people.

Lesbians and other queer women have consistently found refuge within federal jobs, and Pruitt’s experience was no different. Her experience in the Vietnam era was different from those of other wars, however, due to Vietnam’s unique place in history. The dominant homophobic culture of the United States was being publicly and successfully challenged for the first time in its history, exemplified by events such as the Stonewall Riots and the Leonard Matlovich case. More than ever before, queer women were encouraged to seek a career through the military, not only for financial stability but for a supportive community network, access to other queer individuals, and work within a traditionally masculine space.

Oral histories and interviews of World War II veterans paint the picture of a remarkably queer Women’s Army Corps (WAC), setting the stage for what the culture would be like by the time Pruitt enlisted. Pat Bond, a lesbian who joined the WAC in 1945, recalled her recruitment sergeant being a masculine gay woman, and even entering the barracks for the first time and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

hearing someone shout, “Good God, Elizabeth, here comes another one!”<sup>26</sup> The butch stereotype served many military women well as it allowed them to bend typical gender presentation standards and to find one another easily, according to Allan Bérubé in *Coming Out Under Fire*. This norm lasted throughout the 20th century and arguably into the 21st.

The intersection of both the female and the gay identity put queer women in a unique position in this time of social upheaval. The concerns of The Lavender Menace, a name for a coalition of queer women in the civil rights era, differed from those of both heterosexual women and gay men and thus sought their own solutions. Lesbians like Pruitt took an active role in their community, some setting up health clinics or grassroots political organizations that benefited both women and queer people.<sup>27</sup> While linked and often allied, gay men and gay women both saw the need to fight for their unique needs within the larger community.

Once Pruitt had left active duty to go to seminary, she stayed in the Individual Ready Reserves and was even preparing to be promoted to Major. However, once an interview with the Los Angeles Times was published in 1983 about Pruitt’s experience with the MCC, which mentioned her lesbian identity, she was put under military investigation for moral dereliction. The rules that led to her investigation, according to Pruitt, were drastically different from the rules that she worked under during the Vietnam years, “Between Carter and Reagan, they had changed the rules, and put in the most draconian rules that you've ever seen, where you couldn't even think homosexual thoughts or they'd throw you out.”<sup>28</sup> Pruitt argues that these changes were largely due to the Leonard Matlovich and Miriam Ben-Shalom cases in the late 1970s.

Matlovich became possibly the most famous openly gay man in the United States in the 1970s after he was featured on the cover of a 1975 TIME Magazine under the headline, “I Am a

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<sup>26</sup> Bronski, *A Queer History*, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 213.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Homosexual.” He was given a general discharge from the Air Force and went on to become a public figure and advocate for gay rights. Eventually, in 1980 a judge ordered for him to be reinstated and given five years worth of back pay.<sup>29</sup> Miriam Ben-Shalom’s case was similar in that she was also an openly queer individual who was reinstated to her position in the military by the order of a federal judge after being discharged.<sup>30</sup> Pruitt, when asked about treatment of queer service members under later presidents, said,

I’m convinced that the Reagan Era rules came as a result of Leonard Matlovich almost winning. His lawyers were afraid to take it to the Supreme Court because they were afraid they would lose forever and ever. And really get a horrible decision that would not allow us ever again to challenge the gays in the military thing. So they didn’t go to the Supreme Court, but it scared the conservatives enough to where they wrote those draconian rules.<sup>31</sup>

The specific environment that the Vietnam era had cultivated for queer service members, along with the concurrent civil rights movements, was one that motivated many to be vocal about their queerness, leading to monumental court cases that repeatedly affirmed that the military could not constitutionally exclude queer soldiers. These landmark decisions for people like Matlovich and Ben-Shalom lead to stricter rules about homosexuality in the military for a time, and eventually the policy of DADT. The court decisions of the post-Vietnam era scared homophobic policy makers enough to enact specific rules to try and stamp out the blossoming queer military culture that was thriving at the time.

Pruitt’s time in the Army and later career as an openly queer religious leader signifies the beginning of a new era in queer history, one where people could be candid about their sexuality and retain their social and economic standing amongst their peers. The 1970s being a time where

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<sup>29</sup> Lily Rothman, “How a Closeted Air Force Sergeant Became the Face of Gay Rights,” *TIME*, September 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Julia Diana Robertson, “Miriam Ben-Shalom: The Woman Who Fought ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,’” *Huffpost*, June 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Carolyn Dusty Pruitt, interview by Steve Estes, January 12, 2005, Carolyn Dusty Pruitt Collection (AFC/2001/001/43222), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

gay men and women alike were reinstated to their military positions after being discharged due to homophobic was a vastly different world from the homophobic rhetoric of the Second Red Scare, only twenty years prior, that ruined countless lives. Pruitt found a successful career in the Army, where she was able to connect with more queer people than she thought possible. The Army was a key element for Pruitt, a queer woman, to support herself and others like her economically and socially.



## Conclusion

The purpose of pointing out intricate rituals is not to ridicule men who consider themselves straight for pursuing physical contact with other men, but to criticize the society that forces them to jump through hoops in order to somehow portray same-sex intimacy as heterosexual. Intricate rituals are a symptom of toxic masculinity and homophobia, yet they also speak to the yearning within a person for tenderness and connection with their peers. The military continues to be one of the largest stages for these rituals and it is only with long term change in cultural values and beliefs can these rituals be put aside for straightforward interactions between men.

Restricting military service to heterosexual, cisgendered individuals was not only bigoted but also wildly unrealistic. There is rarely concrete evidence for one's queerness, and finding enough to be definitive can waste countless amounts of time, effort, and taxpayer money. President Clinton had initially made the pledge during his campaign to lift the ban on homosexual service members entirely, but instead compromised with senior military and congressional leaders with Don't Ask Don't Tell.<sup>32</sup> This was meant to be an improvement on the previous policy, and in many ways it was, but many queer service members found themselves in a limbo of technically being allowed to serve but also knowing their careers could be swiftly ended if they were outed in any way. The Obama Administration eventually repealed DADT in 2011, meaning LGBT service members who had been discharged were offered re-enrollment and discharges on the basis of homosexuality were prohibited.

It is debatable as to whether or not the repeal of this policy had real, tangible effects on LGBT rights in the United States. Many in the Obama administration argued at the time that the

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<sup>32</sup> National Defense Research Institute. *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: An Update of RAND's 1993 Study*. RAND Corporation, 2010.

repeal was breaking down barriers and allowing patriotic Americans to serve their nation no matter who they loved. The repeal of DADT by no means ended homophobia in the United States, LGBT individuals are still being targeted by violence and discrimination every day. Many state and federal legislatures today are attempting to ban same-sex marriage despite the landmark 2015 Supreme Court case that legalized it nationwide. President Trump's ban on transgender military service members in 2019 is even more proof that this homophobic and transphobic culture did not die with DADT but rather has changed and remodeled itself for the modern age. It was not until 2003 with the Supreme Court Case *Lawrence v. Texas* that private, consensual intercourse between two persons of the same sex was recognized as fully legal in the United States. Progress is slow, with frequent setbacks and discouraging developments, but society trudges forward nevertheless.

Barbara Kruger crafted an invaluable term for scholars of queer culture and history with her 1981 work, giving a name to a phenomenon no doubt known to gay men for generations. Intricate rituals are an essential piece of not only queer history but also military history, often in direct contrast to the stated goals of the military itself. One does not have to explicitly identify as queer to participate in queer culture and relationships. Many straight men, or men who considered themselves to be straight, have happily contributed to these rituals, perhaps without even considering the implications. These men too, unwittingly at times, are a part of queer history by incident of their chosen life path. The Vietnam era upended many traditional social views, including those surrounding sexuality and queerness. While of course many suffered under systemic homophobia, it was also a time of great social and political advancement. By viewing queer history not only as a story of oppression and hatred but also one of victory and love, as it frequently was for service members in the Vietnam era, the normalization of LGBT

individuals is strengthened. Intricate rituals are not bad, they are an expression of a deeply repressed desire for connection with your fellow humans. With progress, these complicated processes can be untangled and simplified to what they were always meant to be: love.

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## **A Woman of Her Time - Nursing and Gender in the Cold War**

Bette J. Barto maintained a steady stream of communication she had established with her parents years prior even during the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of the most direct confrontations between the United States and Soviet Union of the Cold War. The crisis came to a boiling point when Barto, an American military nurse, was stationed at Goldsboro Air Force Base in North Carolina while her husband, the pilot Raphael “Ray” Barto, was in Florida. As six flight nurses and eighteen medical technicians from Goldsboro were alerted to go as a field hospital unit, Bette was issued a field pack containing emergency supplies, and ordered to buy military fatigues. When Ray shortly thereafter returned home, he panicked upon seeing his wife seemingly prepared for all-out war. Bette wrote to her parents after the fact, saying, “I guess it was the first time he realized I was in the military for better or worse too.”<sup>33</sup> Despite years of marriage and even longer spent in the Air Force alongside each other, Ray could forget the very real danger that his wife faced every day working in the hospital on base. Her presence in the military was not something he was confronted with in such a visceral manner before then.

The image of female military nurses with long careers in the medical field is hard to reconcile with the popular idea of the idyllic 1950s housewife safe behind a white picket fence. Bette, a white woman pursuing a career in nursing during the Cold War, was not alone in choosing this career path. Society viewed nursing as inherently feminine and thus did not challenge traditional gender roles of feminine subservience, making it a suitable long term career even for married women. The Cold War rhetoric for the American nuclear family – a male

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<sup>33</sup> Bette J. Barto to Parents, 5 November 1962, Barto (Bette J.) Cold War Correspondence (2017-219-w-rd), Center for American War Letters, Chapman University, CA (hereafter Barto Correspondence).

breadwinner, submissive housewife, and a few children – frequently made exceptions for working women who were still viewed as proper women, such as nurses. Female nurses would specifically become portrayed as crucial to the United States’ success in the fight against communism, their tireless efforts keeping America’s fighting men healthy. Bette’s adherence to certain gendered norms allowed her to bend or even break other conventions, revealing a mid 20th century American society was less restrictive than popular perceptions would have it. Even so, assigned gender roles shaped virtually all aspects of her life and that of her husband, Ray. Throughout her letters, Bette performs femininity to her parents, meaning she could transgress certain norms without criticism. Bette’s letters reveal how military nurses in the 1950s and 1960s could sustain long careers in the medical field while still conforming to traditional ideals of femininity.

### **Letters as a Historical Source**

Bette wrote over 130 letters to her parents, Hugh Elmer and Elizabeth Marie Harris, between 1956 and 1968, arguably the height of the Cold War as well as a time of great social change in the United States. The letters in the collection start in earnest once Bette is stationed in Libya, a way to stay in contact with her parents despite her overseas deployment. They continue for many years, progressively becoming less frequent as Bette’s career develops. Anywhere from two to eight pages in length, Bette carefully documented much of her daily life as well as major developments in flowing cursive handwriting.

To use letters as a historical source requires care. Historians need to heavily consider the circumstances of letters when analyzing them. Audience is especially key; a letter to a close friend will undoubtedly be framed differently than a letter to a distant relative. Letters intended for a small audience illustrate a singular experience in the past, one that may or may not be the

norm for its era. Letters are a powerful window into the world of a person from the past, the things they considered to be important, and the messages they took the time to send to others.

Historian Thomas E. Rodgers, in his article “Civil War Letters as Historical Sources,” notes that, “Used in conjunction with the manuscript census, marriage records, newspapers, and other such records and sources, Civil War letters provide historians with the opportunity to reconstruct much of the content and dynamics of life.”<sup>34</sup> Letters serve as a first hand account of emotions, opinions, and concerns, and when supported by other primary and secondary sources, can help to create an accurate portrait of historical life. Many historians, such as Andrew J. Huebner, Susan L. Carruthers, and Dr. Kyle Longley have written works built upon the foundation of letter collections and used them effectively by juxtaposing them with other materials. Huebner argues in the introduction of his work *Love and Death in the Great War* that letters and other personal writings allow historians to connect areas typically considered separate, such as consolidating the narratives between large government entities and individual people.<sup>35</sup>

The primary sources that allow a complete analysis of Bette’s letters include a series of newspapers from both Knoxville, Tennessee, the town that her parents lived in, and Goldsboro, North Carolina where Bette would eventually be stationed. Some other primary sources are US Census data, records kept by the American Nursing Association, and assorted publications from *The American Journal of Nursing*. These sources expand the world as portrayed by Bette, and are key to determining if Bette’s words and actions were anomalous for the time.

The letters written by Bette Barto hold a profound significance when analyzing the gender norms of the mid twentieth century. Her audience was her parents, who most likely had

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas E. Rodgers, “Civil War Letters as Historical Sources.” *Indiana Magazine of History* 93, no. 2 (June 1997): 107.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew J. Huebner, *Love and Death in the Great War*. Oxford University Press, 2018, 4.



specific expectations of their daughter's behavior and, despite the lack of formal censors covering military correspondence, she would have presumably tailored her messages to fit with acceptable conversation topics of the day on her own. Given that gender is largely a performance, a set of behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits that people primarily express in the presence of others, her letters offer a clear look into how she wanted her parents to see her and her experiences.<sup>36</sup> The influence of social norms on her words cannot be exactly calculated, but it is difficult to ignore that Bette's letters focused on the more feminine side of her life.

Bette adhered to common ideas of gender and gender roles in each part of her letters sent home to her parents. While letters are addressed to both parents, Bette assumed by default that her mother was going to be the one reading the letter and then relaying the information to her father and other people at home, meaning she shaped her language differently than she would have in talking directly to her father. The clearest example of this is in a pair of letters Bette sent in 1961, after she had been transferred to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina. Due to her father being in the hospital at the time, she wrote two separate letters on the same day to each parent so they could each receive correspondence from her. The differences between these two letters are stark, especially when conventional gender roles are considered. Bette's letter to her father discussed the barbecue she bought for Ray as a Christmas gift, Ray's work at the air base, and sent wishes for her father to feel better and cooperate with the doctors taking care of him.<sup>37</sup> Her letter to her mother, written directly after the one to her father, discussed going dancing in a new dress, Christmas dinner at a friend's house, and chores to do while Ray was away for work.<sup>38</sup> Bette clearly chose the content of her letters based on her audience, in this case

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<sup>36</sup> Britta N. Torgirson, and Christopher T. Minson. "Sex and Gender: What is the Difference?" *Journal of Applied Physiology* 99, no. 3 (September 2005): 785–787.

<sup>37</sup> Barto to Father, 27 December 1961, Barto Correspondence.

<sup>38</sup> Barto to Mother, 27 December 1961, Barto Correspondence.

her mother or father, revolving around traditional gendered ideas about what things different people are interested in discussing.

The Bette Barto letter collection is very one-sided, featuring only a single letter Bette received from her parents over the course of their communication. Likely, this collection is the result of her parents saving the letters that their daughter sent home from abroad. This imbalance means it is impossible to know what kinds of messages Bette herself was receiving or the values that they contained. Her responses to questions or comments offer some suggestions, but most is lost. This caveat does not undermine the importance of the words Bette wrote, however. As it stands, this letter collection reveals how a Cold War era nurse spoke to her parents, what she thought was important to communicate, and how societal pressures potentially shaped how, what, and when she would write.

### **Literature on Gender and the Cold War**

Assigned gender is the gender given to a person when they are born, typically based on the person's physical appearance or other more arbitrary reasoning.<sup>39</sup> Gender as it was commonly understood in the time of Bette's career was binary, with people having to fall into the category of male or female. In this case, Bette's assigned gender was female, meaning there were certain expectations placed upon her that differed from those placed on people assigned male at birth. These societal gender roles had an effect on her that is clearly displayed in her communication with her parents.

Bette's letters began just a few years after the end of the Second Red Scare in the United States, approximately 1957, meaning that Bette and the people around her were shaped by the strong anti-communist current of society. The Second Red Scare rhetoric encouraged people to

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<sup>39</sup> Torgrimson, and Minson. "Sex and Gender," 768.

adhere to their assigned gender roles. By conflating the ideas of communism with the ideas of feminism and homosexuality, performing traditional womanhood or manhood became essential. Homophobic rhetoric became key to the United States government's attack on communists, as discussed by Kyle Cuordileone in his article "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960." Cuordileone argues that by conflating communism and homosexuality, American propagandists convinced many Americans that capitalism and traditional gender norms were crucial to maintaining the tenuous balance of society.<sup>40</sup> Men who wanted to be viewed as red-blooded, patriotic Americans needed to appear hypermasculine to fend off any accusations of homosexuality as well as communism. Conversely, as argued by Landon R. Y. Storrs, the U.S. government pushed the idea that women needed to avoid feminism at all costs and restrict themselves to the domestic sphere for the same reasons of national security and social standing.<sup>41</sup> The emphasis on a social and behavioral divide between men and women reached a new peak of importance at the dawn of the Cold War. This was the environment in which Bette began her education and later, pursued her career.

Dissent arose nonetheless. Betty Friedan's 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique*, often credited with at least partially inspiring the second wave of feminism in the United States, discusses "the problem that has no name"; namely women feeling unfulfilled by a life confined to the domestic sphere. Domesticity was marketed and sold to educated white women as the place where they would be happiest, where they as women would feel most content due to their inherent nature, and yet many of those women in this time period felt the monotony of domestic life made their lives pointless.<sup>42</sup> Especially with the newer trend of women being allowed into

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<sup>40</sup> Kyle A. Cuordileone. "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960." *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 515-45.

<sup>41</sup> Landon R. Y. Storrs, "Attacking the Washington 'Femmocracy': Antifeminism in the Cold War Campaign against 'Communists in Government.'" *Feminist Studies* 33, no. 1 (2007): 118-52.

<sup>42</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.

higher education, many women felt they had wasted their potential, having been convinced to instead be a homemaker. This work had a large impact on female audiences upon its release, inspiring many women to go back to school or to join the workforce. Bette had begun her career long before Friedan published her work, but the conversation Friedan started would greatly impact how future historians would view women like Bette.

Friedan's work had a strong influence on the historiography of the time period, leading many scholars, for example, Dr. Elizabeth Whitaker in her book *An Analysis of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique*, to see popular post war ideology as overwhelmingly conservative, demanding women to return home. Other works such as Elaine Tyler May's book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, have argued that only the fringe few protested the return to domesticity in postwar society, often basing their claims on the same works Friedan relied upon as a source. However, Joanne Meyerowitz argues that Friedan's work cannot be taken as a homogenous account of all women in the postwar period, specifically noting Friedan's lack of queer and nonwhite perspectives. Rather than tear it all down, Meyerowitz sought to fill in the gaps of Friedan's work to illustrate a more full image of the postwar period in her essay "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958." To do this, Meyerowitz investigated a sample of women's magazines that was broader and more diverse than Friedan's, providing a tentative albeit fuller picture of postwar culture's opinions on working women. These magazines included *Reader's Digest*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, focusing mostly on the nonfiction articles present. According to Meyerowitz, these articles did not over glorify domesticity or demand for women to return to domestic life. American media contained many contradicting and competing voices, with intent and belief varying wildly depending on the kind of publication, intended audience, and background of the

author. The samples she analyzed showed a nuanced vision of women, where working women in prominent public roles and housewives were both celebrated for their achievements.<sup>43</sup>

Meyerowitz offers a strong argument against the commonly held belief that all American women were forced back into the home by media and social opinions during demobilization.

Bette reveals another dimension to Meyerowitz's nuanced portrayal of women in the Cold War era. The government and the press narrowly defined what was and what was not acceptable for proper women to do with their lives. Given that nursing fit neatly into the traditional view of femininity, female nurses were still allotted their space in the professional medical field. Bette, like many educated working women of the time period, did not identify as a feminist, even as she subverted the housewife ideal, avoiding the negative connotations and possible repercussions the term carried. Yet, in other ways, by serving in the military, and leading an independent professional life, she did transgress gender norms.

In the fifth chapter of Charissa Threat's book *Nursing Civil Rights: Gender and Race in the Army Nurse Corps*, titled "The Quality of a Person: Race and Gender Roles Re-Imagined?", she discusses the specific status for female nurses within the US military and traditional gender roles. Female nurses in the military were held to lofty gendered expectations that depended on the idea that nursing was inherently feminine because of its maternal aspects and caretaker duties. The educated working woman could exist within postwar society as long as she fulfilled specific feminine professions such as nursing.<sup>44</sup>

Sharon A. Vairo, in her dissertation on the early history of the United States Air Force Nurse Corps (AFNC), recognized a few key factors that continually shaped female careers

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<sup>43</sup>Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946- 1958." *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1455-82.

<sup>44</sup>Charissa Threat. "The Quality of a Person: Race and Gender Roles Re-Imagined?" In *Nursing Civil Rights: Gender and Race in the Army Nurse Corps*, 107-28. University of Illinois Press, 2015.

throughout the period from 1949-1954. A slow advance in status kept nurses from effectively carrying out their duties. In 1901, with the creation of the Army Nurse Corps (ANC), military nurses had no rank and little pay yet incredibly demanding responsibilities. By the time Bette joined, air force nurses had won rank and classification, though the speed with which nurses could move upwards through the ranks was still slow compared to other sections of the military that were male dominated.<sup>45</sup> The AFNC, created in 1949, worked hard to secure benefits and recognition for its members.

### **Head Nurse Bette Barto**

Born in 1928 as Bette J. Harris, Bette graduated from Vanderbilt University with a B.S. in Nursing in 1950. She began as a civilian nurse, working at East Tennessee Baptist Hospital in Knoxville where her parents lived, and was then appointed to the Air Force Reserve Nurse Corps in 1957. Bette started at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas with the 3700th Military Training Wing and then was transferred to Wheelus Air Force Base in Tripoli, Libya in early 1959, becoming Head Nurse there with the 7272 Air Base Wing. Her working days were long and filled with chaos, as she frequently lamented in her letters, but she also found time to sightsee around Tripoli, spend time with her friends on the base, and even take up golfing as a hobby.

Her early letters from Tripoli show the great culture shock that Bette experienced. She discusses the food and accommodations frequently, professing their inferiority to the kinds she knew from the United States. During her time in Libya, presumably her first time living in a majority non white country, she expressed ignorance about people of other races and cultures. When there was a strike at a civilian airport in Tripoli that delayed Bette getting her mail temporarily, she commented that the strike would most likely not last long since “[Arabs] are too

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<sup>45</sup> Sharon A. Vairo, “History of the United States Air Force Nurse Corps, 1949-1954,” PhD diss., (University of San Diego, 1998).

lazy to hold out at anything very long.”<sup>46</sup> Adjusting to life in another country was difficult for Bette and these stereotypes were likely all she knew going to the Wheelus air base.

It was at the Wheelus AFB that Bette would meet her future husband, Raphael “Ray” Barto. Ray was a fighter pilot and flight commander in the Tactical Fighter Training Branch of the 7272nd Air Base Wing. Mentions of Ray in Bette’s letters to her parents slowly become more common as her time in Tripoli continues, charting the progression of their relationship. She and Ray began dating shortly after they met in 1959 and as of June of 1960, Bette was discussing their wedding plans with her parents. When Ray was reassigned to an air base in the United States, Bette had no choice but to put her plans into motion. While on leave, Ray returned to Tripoli to marry Bette so she could be reassigned to the same base as him and they could be together. The red tape the couple needed to fight through to organize the wedding was relentless, leading Bette to write “I’ve decided it would be easier to marry an Arab than for 2 AF officers to try it.”<sup>47</sup> A few months after their long-awaited wedding, Bette was reassigned to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina, the same base Ray was then located at, where she continued in her role as Chief Nurse.

Bette took great pride in her work, devoting practically her entire adult life to the field of nursing. She openly shared her achievements with her parents through her letters. After a disaster alert drill, she happily wrote, “They all were impressed with the way we worked, and I had more than one doctor compliment my war staff for the decisive manner in which each in-coming victim was handled.”<sup>48</sup> Notably, this was Bette not only taking pride in her work as a nurse but also as a commanding officer in a leadership role. Besides showing her parents how rewarding

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<sup>46</sup> Barto to Parents, 24 November 1959, Barto Correspondence.

<sup>47</sup> Barto to Parents, 29 August 1960, Barto Correspondence.

<sup>48</sup> Barto to Parents, 15 October 1961, Barto Correspondence.

and valuable her career was, she also frequently talked about Ray's successes in his career as a pilot and in the process lifting up her husband's image in her parents' eyes.

Bette's specific status as a white American woman was essential to her life. As pointed out by historian Alice Kessler-Harris, women who were of a low socioeconomic status or nonwhite women were relatively common in the workforce compared to educated, white women. After World War 2, demobilization did not lead to all women returning to the domestic sphere. White, upper-middle class, educated women, specifically, were at the heart of the so-called return home in the postwar era.<sup>49</sup> Bette was a white woman, meaning her career needed to be feminine to be acceptable, whereas women of color had long been accepted as members of the workforce.

Possibly the most controversial and gender nonconforming thing about the Bartos was their decision as a heterosexual married couple in the 20th century to not have children. For a couple that usually followed gender roles so neatly, the times they do diverge are stark. The labor force participation rate of white, married women in 1960 was roughly 30%, by 1950 approximately 42% of white nurses were married, a figure that rose throughout the remainder of the century.<sup>50</sup> Bette's experience as a married, white nurse was becoming increasingly common throughout her lifetime. To not have any children as a married woman was still rare in the 1960s, with the average birth rate being around 3 live births per woman in 1965.<sup>51</sup> Bette was mostly representative of her demographic – white, married, female nurse – except for the key factor of children. This is seemingly the only time that Bette's life diverges drastically from the statistical average, making her life mostly representative of her era with an important caveat.

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<sup>49</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris. *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview*. Feminist Press, 1981.

<sup>50</sup> Patricia D'Antonio and Jean C. Whelan. "Counting Nurses: The Power of Historical Census Data." *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 18, no. 19 (Oct 2009): 2717-2747.

<sup>51</sup> National Center for Health Statistics, "Expected Number of Births over a Woman's Lifetime – National Vital Statistics System, United States, 1940-2018" *National Vital Statistics System*. Birth data, 1940–2018. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/births.htm>.



Bette only directly addressed her childlessness in her letters to her parents a few times. In 1961 while Ray was away on work, she wrote, “The only consolation is that I'm not the only one, about every 4th house around here has a 'gone' husband most of the time. At least I don't have children to rear by myself – like sister.”<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, she expressed being without children as a positive rather than a negative. With Ray's pilot work taking him all over the country and Bette's long hours at the hospital, Bette saw having a kid as difficult and wished for her parents to see it the same.

According to historian Cynthia Enloe, the military had strict regulations against married nurses and nurses with children entering the armed services in the early years of the Cold War. The logistics of deployed mothers seemed too cumbersome for an organization focused on fighting an ideological war. If a nurse was married and then joined the military, she was abandoning her domestic duties to care for other men, raising concerns about their respectability. There was also the stereotype of nurses falling in love with their patients, meaning they had to be single in case it occurred. Entering the military as a single woman, as Bette did, was key to being accepted into the armed forces in the 1950s. In 1901 with the founding of the ANC, nurses who married would be given a dishonorable discharge. It was not until after World War II that this rule was changed, allowing nurses who married to continue their careers, unless they became pregnant.<sup>53</sup>

A 1962 survey of army nurses conducted by the ANC concluded that if the military wished to have sufficient nurse labor, they needed to accept that young women studying to be nurses wanted to eventually get married and have kids.<sup>54</sup> Eventually, the military began to loosen

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<sup>52</sup> Barto to Parents, 10 October 1961, Barto Correspondence.

<sup>53</sup> Kara Dixon Vuic, “I'm afraid we're going to have to just change our ways”: Marriage, Motherhood, and Pregnancy in the Army Nurse Corps during the Vietnam War” *Signs* 32, no. 4 (2007): 997-1022.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 1000.

their restrictions on nurses being married and having children. A major factor in this change was the Korean War, where the military needed to maintain its nurse labor force.<sup>55</sup> The ANC even used the idea of finding a husband in the armed forces as a recruitment tool, publishing a brochure in 1968 that said, “Your Army friends will last a lifetime. Don’t be surprised if a diamond crops up on your left hand!”<sup>56</sup> The number of married nurses serving increased rapidly at this time, and by 1967 over 24% of the ANC was married.<sup>57</sup> Single women joining the military were expected to eventually marry a man they met due to their service. These women were of the same era as Bette, the first time married women could have careers in nursing in the military.

Pregnancy posed a threat to the careers of military nurses, due to societal pressures as well as time restraints. An estimated 3.1% of the ANC left the ranks due to pregnancy and parenthood in 1963.<sup>58</sup> Throughout the 1960s, nurses were subject to the 1948 Women’s Armed Services Integration Act, prohibiting women in the military from having dependents under the age of 18, and allowing the military to discharge women for pregnancy or parenthood.<sup>59</sup> Motherhood and career were not compatible in the eyes of the military. Unsurprisingly, this same restriction was not applied to male service members, or even male nurses. It would not be until the late 1960s that waivers for women who became pregnant but wished to keep their jobs would become available. Bette and many other nurses at this time were effectively discouraged from becoming pregnant if they wished to keep their jobs.

### **Nursing as the Celebrated Exception**

Bette’s choice to continue in her nursing career as a married woman was unusual, even if she was not alone in making that choice. Bette was able to continue her career and still fit within

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 999.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 1001.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 1001.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 1008.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 1008.

the gender construct of a traditional woman. Dr. Charissa Threat argues that female nurses in the postwar period were able to keep their jobs despite demobilization since they filled the essential feminine niche of maternal caretaking and healing. An educated woman could have a career as long as that career was socially accepted to be feminine and seen as a job that a man could not do as well as a woman. Bette could continue working even though she was married because nursing did not pose a threat to traditional gender roles.

Dr. Threat also argues that the military nursing corps was an important place for social change and the site of increased rights for both women and nonwhite people. She describes the ANC as an unwitting participant in the Civil Rights Movement, and many reforms that were fought for and enacted by military nurses eventually found their way into the private sector, helping improve the lives of civilian nurses.<sup>60</sup> She attributes this at least partially to the military's reliance on codes of conduct, meaning, "it was somewhat more manageable for the army to implement changes concerning race and gender norms."<sup>61</sup> Bette's story shows how the military gave women a chance to have a long career in medicine, one that might not have otherwise been available to them, by providing training and encouragement.

Barbara Pini, in her 2005 article on women in traditionally male managerial occupations, argues the existence of a supposed third sex. She describes this third sex as a social compromise between feminine and masculine traits which allows women to hold leadership positions. Women will amplify traditionally feminine behaviors that are beneficial to their workplace but also must maintain masculine traits associated with leadership to be respected in their role.<sup>62</sup> Bette, in her position as chief nurse, needed to assume the typical image of a maternal caretaker while

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<sup>60</sup> Charissa Threat. "The Quality of a Person: Race and Gender Roles Re-Imagined?" In *Nursing Civil Rights: Gender and Race in the Army Nurse Corps*, 107–28. University of Illinois Press, 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara Pini, "The Third Sex: Women Leaders in Australian Agriculture." *Gender, Work, and Organization* 12, no. 1 (Jan 2005): 73-88.

simultaneously maintaining the authority required to hold a commanding rank. By adapting and molding feminine stereotypes to suit her needs, Bette was both the doting nurse and the decisive decision maker she needed to be.

In 1951, the Conference on Women in the Defense Decade featured Margaret Culkin Banning, novelist and women's rights activist, who argued for the increased presence of women in the armed forces. Banning stated, "Women must work, and will work, outside their homes, not only because of war industry, but because living costs and inflation make it necessary."<sup>63</sup> The modern American economy needed labor, and it seemed almost inevitable to many that women would be the ones to fill this need. The Cold War, and its corresponding hot wars, was enough of a threat to some Americans to accept women in the labor force. Due to the increasing demands of the military, women would also be needed in the armed forces, albeit still restrained to non combat roles for the moment, and at least partially out of the home.

Banning continued, saying that, "Many girls and young women...may not realize that they can keep a family from being broken up if they will volunteer for armed services; accepting this responsibility, they might prevent some young married man from being called up."<sup>64</sup> This argument emphasizes the importance of the nuclear family as a unit, and that young, single women could spare breadwinning men the fate of being unavailable to their family. Instead of military service breaking up families, by embracing women into the service the family unit could remain cohesive. Members of the conference even proposed the idea of a national registration of women between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five, used as convincing evidence of the need for woman-power in armed forces. Bette herself entered the air force as one of those single, young

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<sup>63</sup> Margaret Culkin Banning, "Women in the Defense Decade" *The American Journal of Nursing* 51, no. 12 (Dec 1951): 748-749

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 749.

women who could help keep servicemen with their families by taking on international assignments.

At another 1951 conference, the Conference of State Directors of Public Health Nursing, Ruth B. Freeman, Nursing Consultant with the National Security Resources Board and head of the school of hygiene at Johns Hopkins University, spoke about the labor demand for nurses specifically, predicting that the United States would need 100,000 more nurses by 1960 to meet growing demands.<sup>65</sup> Freeman's prediction would come to fruition, with the intersection of a nursing labor shortage, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, second wave feminism, and U.S. participation in the Vietnam war creating the circumstances needed for female nurses to push for equality in the armed forces.<sup>66</sup>

The statistics available from the then recent Korean War helped prove how essential nurses, especially air force nurses, were to any and all war efforts. Approximately 120,000 women were on active duty in Korea at the time of the war. Of those women, one third were in the healthcare field while the others were a part of women-specific branches of the army, air force, or navy such as the Women's Army Corps (WAC). Helicopter front line evacuation of wounded during the Korean War was considered a major factor in reducing the mortality rate for the hospitalized wounded to 2.5% compared to the 4.5% from World War II.<sup>67</sup> This use of helicopters, also called aeromedical evacuation, would effectively eliminate the need for hospital ships to transport wounded personnel. Of the 313,000 patients transported using this method during the Korean War, only 15 of them died in-flight, with the deaths unrelated to conditions of the flight itself.<sup>68</sup> It was undeniable that nurses in warzones helped the military to minimize

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<sup>65</sup> Pearl McIver and Ruth G. Taylor. "Summary of the Conference of State Directors of Public Health Nursing." *Public Health Reports* 66, no. 17 (April 1951): 515-517.

<sup>66</sup>Threat. *Nursing Civil Rights*, 114.

<sup>67</sup> Vairo, "History of the United States Air Force Nurse Corps," 35.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

casualties and boost the overall health of the fighting force. This led to an increase of overall appreciation for military nurses amongst the American public, warming many to the idea of women in active service roles.

Overtime, nurses became not just an exception to the masculine norm of the military nor a reluctant necessity of the Cold War, but a celebrated female addition. An article published in 1946 titled “What Government Officials Think about Nursing”, written by Edward Bernays, focused on the way certain male-dominated government officials viewed nurses and the field of nursing’s impact on national security. Bernays polled a sample of federal, state, and city administrators across the country and found that three-fourths of those who responded believed that nurses made “an excellent contribution to the war effort.”<sup>69</sup> Nurses had become a permanent fixture of the military in the minds of many government employees, largely because of the contributions nurses made during World War II, making women critical to any future conflicts and even national security overall. Removing women from the armed forces entirely was no longer feasible in the 20th century after the recognition of their success in both World War II and the Korean War.

Nurses who served in the Korean War, only slightly before Bette’s enrollment in the military, noted the increasing acceptance and celebration of military nurses. Medic Shirley Gates McBride noted in an interview with the Korean War Legacy Foundation that, at least economically, things were equal between men and women, “[We got] the same pay. You were not a female soldier, you were a soldier. And, you were a ‘corpsman’, not a ‘corpswoman.’ It was ‘yes, ma’am’ and ‘no, ma’am,’ and ‘yes, sir’ and ‘no, sir.’”<sup>70</sup> This equality, according to another nurse, was not only economic but increasingly social as well. Private Doris Porpiglia

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<sup>69</sup> Edward L. Bernays, “What Government Officials Think about Nursing.” *The American Journal of Nursing* 46, no. 1 (Jan 1946): 22-25.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Shirley Gates McBride. *Korean War Legacy Foundation*, 2018.

who served in the army during the Korean War recalled that her immediate family was overwhelmingly supportive of her decision to join the military, the only exception being one aunt that scolded her, saying ladies should not take on a man's role. Porpiglia pushed back against this sexist rhetoric, writing to her aunt saying, "I am more of a lady than you'll ever be."<sup>71</sup> Slowly but surely, the presence of women in the armed forces was becoming a welcomed fact of life rather than the exception to the rule. The pride that many families of male service members felt was now also seen in some of the families of female service members as well.

The nurses of the Cold War took advantage of concerns surrounding national security, especially the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam War, to elevate their profession's importance in the modern era. Not only were nurses secure within decades of reinforced gender roles for the private sector, but the demands of the Cold War helped them permanently solidify their place within the military. In order for the US military to operate at the level it desired, argued groups such as the American Nurses Association (ANA), it needed a plethora of well-trained and well-paid nurses to take care of soldiers and their families around the world.

The American Nurses Association took on a very active role in promoting the importance of its members. The ANA assisted in the recruitment of military nurses during World War II, campaigning on the noble image of the caretaking nurse. In 1951, the ANA opened a government relations office in the country's capital so it could work with the government to promote the wellbeing and image of nurses in both the private sector as well as the military. In both 1953 and 1954 the ANA attempted to obtain the official declaration of a National Nurse Week by the federal government. In 1966 the ANA pushed for and eventually succeeded to introduce legislation that would raise the rank of chief nurses within the military to top officer

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Private Doris Porpiglia. *Korean War Legacy Foundation*, 2016.

rank, and to increase the number of nurse officers of higher ranks.<sup>72</sup> These women actively fought for their increased status in military standing and overall were quite successful in achieving their goals.

The recruitment efforts for nurses in the Cold War period needed to be accelerated in order to meet demand. The U.S. army needed 2,000 more nurses than they had in 1963 to be operating at full capacity.<sup>73</sup> These efforts focused almost entirely on white women, according to historian Kara Dixon Vuic. Materials used to attract recruits to the nursing corps during the 1960s were almost entirely aimed at female nurses, even though men were also allowed to be nurses.<sup>74</sup> Since it was mostly white female nurses who applied to serve in the military, the recruiters wanted to target them, but since it was mostly white female nurses who were targeted by recruitment efforts, mostly white female nurses would apply to serve in the military. This created a feedback loop that would continue to reaffirm the idea that women were meant to be nurses. Surely if men were meant to be in that caretaking role, the acceptance of male nurses would have evened out the profession in a matter of years.

Female nurses themselves had a vested interest in keeping nursing seen as women's work. The ANC did not allow male nurses into their ranks until 1955, and even then they had the distinction of being a Male Nurse (MN).<sup>75</sup> The livelihood of many women depended on the popular conception of nursing as inherently feminine, and introducing male nurses was a possible threat to this. Social norms meant that people assumed nurses had to be women in order to successfully do their job as professional caretakers, and while this was a stifling restriction on

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<sup>72</sup> "Historical Review." *American Nurses Association*, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Threat. *Nursing Civil Rights*, 125.

<sup>74</sup> Kara Dixon Vuic. *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Threat. *Nursing Civil Rights*, 120.



the profession, it guaranteed many women work in a time where some preferred to keep women solely in the domestic sphere.

If Bette's parents ever had any reservations about their daughter continuing to work after her marriage, it was not expressed in the surviving letter collection. Their explicit approval comes from a wedding announcement that her parents had published in the local *Knoxville News-Sentinel* in 1960. The announcement focused on Bette, discussing where she was stationed and where she studied, and included a photo of Bette and Ray both in their military uniforms for the ceremony that took place at Wheelus AFB. Publishing a distinct image of their daughter in a dress shirt and pants, albeit the military mandated uniform, shows that Bette's parents took great pride in their daughter's service. They wanted their community to know that Bette was a successful air force nurse who was now married to a distinguished air force jet pilot. Like Private Porpiglia before her, Bette's service was supported and encouraged by her parents, another small step towards gendered integration of the military.

The Bartos would be moved several more times to various air force bases within the United States, including McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas. Ray served a tour in Vietnam in the 1960s for which he earned a medal. In 1966, Bette resigned her commission and transferred to a VA hospital in Kansas and Ray retired from the military entirely. Bette's career continued through the majority of her lifetime, even going back to school briefly to get a nurse practitioner certification from Wichita State University in 1976 and an M.S. in Education from Kansas State University in 1983. At the VA, Bette worked as a gerontological nurse practitioner, until she retired in January, 1988. Ray passed away on May 31, 1997 in Missouri and Bette passed away in Massachusetts in 2022.

## The Performance of Femininity

Even with nursing being an acceptable career for white women, Bette still frequently felt compelled to perform her femininity in her letters home. She spent ample time writing about decorating her apartment and dresses, describing different curtains and her time at the hair salon in her letters home. Early in her time at Wheelus, she wrote an entire page focused on a new stereo system she had recently bought and even drew a likeness of it to share.<sup>76</sup> She took great care to describe her living quarters, discussing rugs and table cloths, with only parts of her letters centered on her work. Something especially exciting, like the queen of Libya getting surgery at the base in 1959, had to occur in order for Bette to mention work in her letters. Bette dedicated much of her time and energy to discussing domestic and other traditionally feminine things with her parents in comparison to other topics.

Even complaints Bette had of long work hours were framed in traditionally feminine ways. While in Wheelus, Bette wrote, “I finally made it to the beauty parlor for the first time in over three weeks. I have been so busy that I barely had time to wash my hair myself.”<sup>77</sup> Later, she wrote as a way of describing how tired she is, “My eyes have black circles and I look 150, but I’m happy so who cares!”<sup>78</sup> Her physical looks are used here as the indicator that work has taken up much of her time, leaving her with few chances to maintain a certain appearance. It is a remarkably gendered way of measuring busyness, one that Bette uses frequently throughout her correspondence.

She also took extra precaution in her letters not to alarm her parents, when it seemed she might be in harm’s way. Any and all news of possible danger is quickly followed by reassurance that she is still personally safe and that they should not worry about her. Bette also uses Ray as a

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<sup>76</sup> Barto to Parents, 5 April 1959, Barto Correspondence.

<sup>77</sup> Barto to Parents, 6 October 1959, Barto Correspondence.

<sup>78</sup> Barto to Parents, 6 January 1960, Barto Correspondence.

source of comfort for her parents, telling them that he keeps her safe when they go off base and is vigilant in protecting her from any and all men they may encounter. While in Tripoli, Bette writes to her parents to tell them about a send-off dinner she and some other nurses had downtown. Since Ray could not join them, he instead waited for her to get back before he went to sleep. Bette wrote, “He was so tired he promptly went to sleep as soon as he knew I was back safely from Arab territory. He hates for me to go off base without him.”<sup>79</sup> This is both an endearing anecdote, showing how caring and protective Ray is, and a testimonial to Bette’s parents that she is protected. Traditional gender roles kept everyone happy; Bette’s parents were reassured that she was safe, Ray got to fulfill part of the strong man, and Bette could pursue hypothetically gender defying social activities with the approval of her male chaperone. By focusing on the feminine, and maintaining strong self-censorship on possibly worrying topics, Bette negotiated a space for any nontraditional aspects of her life.

Bette’s self-censorship extended to cover important geopolitical events that were occurring in this period. Using reassuring language in correspondence to not alarm family back home was common among male servicemembers, but as a woman Bette had to especially account for any danger she might encounter. In 1959, she wrote home about riots taking place in Tripoli at the Russian embassy, and assured her parents that, “they won’t let us off base; so there’s no danger here.”<sup>80</sup> Later in the letter, she followed that up with, “if we go to war over Germany it will be over there where you are as well as here so it makes little difference.”<sup>81</sup> Clearly, Bette was concerned that her parents might object to her military career on the basis of her personal safety. By arguing to her parents that the Cold War was inescapable, so she might as well be in Tripoli, Bette once again negotiated a way to justify her career in the military.

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<sup>79</sup> Barto to Parents, 9 December 1959, Barto Correspondence.

<sup>80</sup> Barto to Parents, 20 March 1959, Barto Correspondence.

<sup>81</sup> Barto to Parents, 20 March 1959, Barto Correspondence.

Bette clearly struggled to maintain the balance between domestic life and a career, especially a career as demanding as that of a full-time Chief Nurse in the military. When her part-time maid left, she questioned her ability to maintain a household, writing “I can keep my house half-way clean without too much work, but I simply can't spend every off-duty minute ironing”<sup>82</sup> This rather defensive statement was partly written to assure her parents that she was not neglecting her feminine duties despite working full time, and partly to justify her use of outside help with domestic tasks she could not complete with what time she had. Working women of this time often expressed how exhausted the combination of homemaking and career made them, but they were expected to grin and bear it, as Bette would continue to do.

Throughout the 20th century, military officials believed that American female nurses bolstered male soldiers' morale. Col. Margaret Harper, ANC chief, noted in 1961 that commanders believed female nurses brought with them good morale, giving fighting men the will and strength to continue through rough circumstances.<sup>83</sup> Bette invokes this image when she wrote of her experience going to a bombing range where the F-100 fighters practiced, saying “I stayed all day – the only woman for 100s of miles except the arab ladies.”<sup>84</sup> She goes on to describe how happy the servicemen were to see her, indicating that morale boost noticed by Harper. A white American woman's presence was thought to inspire men to serve honorably, and Bette experienced this phenomenon firsthand.

### **Letters of a Modern Woman**

The Barto collection of correspondence is by no means a complete picture of Bette's life between 1956 and 1968, but it does represent a life common for white female military nurses.

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<sup>82</sup> Barto to Parents, 24 January 1962, Barto Correspondence.

<sup>83</sup> Margaret Harper to Robena C. Anderson, 6 April 1961. ANC Archives, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.

<sup>84</sup> Barto to Parents, 13 May 1959, Barto Correspondence.

Bette was a woman of her time, a working woman who spent her free time seeking out new dresses to wear and getting her hair done at the salon. These two identities, that of a medical professional invested in a career, and a woman who devoted time and energy to her feminine appearance and domestic life, are not separate but rather feed into each other. The tightrope walk between career and homelife, while difficult at times, was perhaps not as treacherous in the mid 20th century as many have been led to think.

When modern day conservatives reminisce about the traditional values America used to have, the actual reality of the past is largely ignored. It is much more rhetorically powerful to harken back to a time where women stayed home and men went to work and no one concerned themselves with social struggles, rather than to admit that the history is much more complicated and nuanced than the perceived norm of the nuclear family. Bette is a distinct example of a white woman who was permitted to continue her career after getting married due to choosing a career path that fit within postwar society gender norms. Nonetheless, multiple aspects of her life story challenged those very same norms.

Bette's story is simultaneously standard and unique for her time. The image of a married, educated woman having a career within the air force nurse corps does not exactly mesh perfectly with the idealized midcentury housewife. While some women undoubtedly lived up to at least the appearance of this perfect homemaker with starch in her skirt and a kid on her hip, it was not nearly as ubiquitous as pop culture portrays. Some American women had prominent roles outside of the traditional domestic sphere at this time, and many were even celebrated by friends and family at the time for their achievements. By working within the gender binary and social expectations for women, some rules thought to be rigid could be bent, meaning a woman who maintained an image of femininity could be allowed into some traditionally masculine roles or

behaviors. Bette's experience shows the flexibility of gender roles under extenuating circumstances such as the Cold War. Gender is often a performance, a set of arbitrary standards that individuals must meet to be well integrated into society, but even with this barrier set before them, individuals throughout history have still lived their lives to the full extent.

Letters have and will continue to be an essential part of historical literature. The letters of Bette reveal a rich life within the military that may have otherwise gone unsung if not for the careful preservation and cataloging of each handwritten page. The writings in letters are invaluable to historians looking to evaluate the social dynamics of different places and time periods, to use the words that people in history themselves wrote no matter how many generations separate them from their subjects. It is inevitable, in many cases, for research to connect with a scholar on a personal level when the thoughts and feelings are expressed as clearly as they are in letters.

The story of Bette Barto is now forever ensconced in an intricate collection of letters, personal photographs, official military documents, and census records. On December 28 of 2022, approximately two weeks after this work was first written and submitted for a grade, Bette passed away at the age of 94. An obituary was subsequently published by the Czelusniak Funeral Home, presumably written by her surviving family. With the obituary, another piece of the puzzle clicks into place. Her middle name had never been explicitly stated in any of the records consulted for this work, only the initial J, which according to the obituary stands for Jewell. So much can be learned through the words Bette herself wrote, her interactions with the world and how she was shaped by the people around her, and yet so much more may have never been recorded. This is the beauty of letters as a historical source, the neverending, complex mystery of

a single human life as displayed on sheets of parchment. Bette lived a remarkable life, one that could not be contained solely to the written word.

ANGEL'S GLOW

Written by

Nat Pendergraft



EXT. BATTLEFIELD - EARLY MORNING

A muddy battlefield is barren, awash with soft dawn light. Text in the lower right corner of the screen reads, "April 6, 1862. Shiloh, Tennessee."

A scouting party comprised of three young soldiers bursts through the tree line and beelines for the tent of COLONEL EVERETT PEABODY (32, mustachioed and stern). The shouts of incoming Confederate soldiers grow closer in the distance, along with occasional rifle fire and horse whinnies.

The rest of the patrol scatters amongst the other tents, raising the alarm as they race through the camp. The Union camp is jolted to life as the sounds of battle approach. Soldiers rush to get dressed and gather their weapons, preparing for the Confederate arrival.

INT. PATRICK'S TENT - SIMULTANEOUS

PATRICK (18, scrawny artilleryman) is startled awake as the scouting party raises the alarm. He and his fellow soldiers jump from their bedrolls and rush into uniform.

Patrick shoulders his rifle and steps out of his tent, only to be run into by a young scout. The scout stumbles for only a minute before taking off running again, Patrick watching him in surprise.

INT. PEABODY'S TENT - CONTINUOUS

The scout bursts into the tent, out of breath and frantic. Peabody was waiting for him, already dressed.

THE SCOUT

Colonel Peabody, sir, we discovered the advancing Confederates a little less than a mile away from here.

PEABODY

How many men?

THE SCOUT

It seems to be Johnston's entire Army of Mississippi, sir.

Peabody swears under his breath.

PEABODY

How long until they arrive?

THE SCOUT  
Any minute now, sir.

At that moment, GENERAL BENJAMIN PRENTISS (43, confident and righteous) storms into Peabody's tent.

PRENTISS  
What is the meaning of this?

PEABODY  
My scouting party found-

PRENTISS  
You were under direct orders to wait until reinforcements arrived.

PEABODY  
The Confederates have been pushing our men back for-

PRENTISS  
You disobeyed orders! You have prematurely engaged the enemy and brought death upon these men!

The clamoring of the camp rushing to readiness has been increasing in the background.

PEABODY  
Sir, if I had not sent the scouting party, they would have surprised us completely.

PRENTISS  
You were told to wait until the Army of Ohio arrived. Believe me when I say I will hold you personally responsible for all the death we see here today.

Prentiss leaves the tent with a huff, mounting his horse.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - CONTINUOUS

The Union army frantically scrambles to readiness.

Patrick rushes to join his company, all carrying the same rifle and dressed in the same Union uniform. They fall into their carefully practiced formation, gathering around Shiloh church. Patrick spares a glance upwards at the plain white building.

COMMANDING OFFICER  
Form a firing line here, men!  
Double-quick!

The artillery men fall into two neat rows, distinguished by a soldier holding a length of rope. Patrick finds himself in the front of the line, clutching his rifle.

COMMANDING OFFICER (CONT'D)  
Fix bayonet!

The men all pull a bayonet from their coats and quickly fix it onto the end of their rifles.

COMMANDING OFFICER (CONT'D)  
Front row, kneel!

A seemingly endless amount of Confederates storm out of the woods, appearing from the morning mist. The battle has begun. The Confederates form their own firing line and aim at the Union soldiers, slowly advancing all the while.

COMMANDING OFFICER (CONT'D)  
Ready! Aim! Fire!

A plume of smoke emerges from the ends of the rifles, proceeded by the crack of gunfire. A few Confederate soldiers drop, presumably dead. The Confederates return the volley, dropping a few Union soldiers. The soldiers on either side of Patrick drop, one right after the other.

COMMANDING OFFICER (CONT'D)  
Reload! Quickly!

The Union soldiers rush to pack powder into their rifles, the threat of imminent gunfire looming over them. The Confederates do the same, the line slowly approaching. Patrick clearly is not the fastest amongst the artillerymen, struggling to load his rifle.

COMMANDING OFFICER (CONT'D)  
Fire at will!

The two sides are now spitting distance from each other. A few Confederates begin to break formation and jog forwards. The commanding officer draws his sword.

COMMANDING OFFICER (CONT'D)  
Charge!

The Union soldiers level their bayonets at the Confederates and charge, a battle cry rising from their ranks. Now both sides are running forward into combat.

The two sides clash, occasional gunfire ringing out, but the bayonets are now the main weapon. Patrick runs forward with his company but gets hit with the butt of a rifle and falls forward.

He scrambles back to his feet, sweaty hands gripping his rifle. He finds himself in a flurry of action, gray and blue uniforms now dispersed throughout the area. His actions are more defensive than offensive, he struggles to take the first swing at someone.

Eventually, he crosses bayonets with a Confederate soldier his same age and build. They struggle, evenly-matched, until Patrick takes a wild, adrenaline-filled swing and stabs the man in the gut with his bayonet.

Blood gushes from the wound and the soldier looks him in the eyes. There's a moment of recognition; in that moment, they are both just boys, fighting someone else's war.

Then, Patrick's training takes over and he viciously twists the bayonet in the soldier's stomach. The soldier howls in pain, and Patrick shoves him off the bayonet and to the ground. The man is dead, or will be soon enough.

The weight of the man's death after that split second of connection falls upon Patrick. He runs, away from the dead Confederate.

He pushes into the woods, crashing through branches and stumbling over bodies. Instinct has taken over, he is not actively abandoning his unit but rather seeking a moment of respite.

There, in a clearing, just beyond the fighting, Patrick sees a woman dressed in dazzlingly clean robes in the forest.

This is ST. BARBARA (patron saint of artillerymen), an apparition that only Patrick is able to see. Just behind her are more Confederate soldiers, engaged in combat with other Union soldiers.

St. Barbara stares through Patrick, beyond his physical self and into his soul. She holds a rifle identical to the one Patrick himself carries, holding it to her shoulder with both hands the way a soldier would.

Patrick stumbles to a stop, baffled by the sight before him. St. Barbara continues to stare. Patrick looks around to see if anyone else is noticing the woman in the woods, but they seem to be in their own bubble.

Unsure, hands shaking, Patrick raises his rifle in her direction. St. Barbara brings her own rifle into firing position, and-

She's vanished, with a crack of gunfire that could easily be mistaken for thunder. The once distant Confederates are now approaching Patrick, forcing him to turn and run back out of the woods to his company once more.

The commanding officer is preparing the company for another wave of soldiers. The artillerymen frantically load their guns.

Patrick stumbles into some semblance of formation, ripping a packet of powder open with his teeth and pouring it down the barrel of his rifle.

A bullet tears out of the forest, from the same place that St. Barbara appeared, and rips into Patrick's thigh. With a cry of pain, he drops to the ground. He clutches the wound, hot tears springing into his eyes.

The battle continues above and around him as he attempts to bandage his gaping wound. He gags at the sight of the blood, but manages to rip a swath of linen from his jacket and tie it securely around his thigh. He drags himself towards the church, away from the approaching Confederates and the apparition in the woods.

He puts his body weight onto the wound, trying to compress it and stop the bleeding as best as he can. The sounds of battle fade away as Patrick loses consciousness.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - DUSK

Patrick snaps awake in a panic, jostling his injured leg. His hands quickly press to his thigh, but the wound seems at least stable for now. The once blue cloth of his makeshift bandage is now soaked a deep red.

Then, out of nowhere-

JACK (O.S.)

I told myself that if anyone around  
me was lucky enough to be alive,  
that I would share.

Patrick looks up to see JACK BOUCHER (20, French-Canadian and heavily wounded) sitting propped up against the white wall of the church building.

Jack is holding a unlabeled, half-empty amber bottle in one hand, the other hand stuffed into his coat, obviously bleeding. On his leg, below his knee, is another gaping wound.

PATRICK

What?

Jack takes a swig.

JACK

You seem to be the only one in arms reach who is not already dead.

Patrick looks around and sees a rapidly darkening sky and a setting sun. Hours have passed since he fell unconscious. Around the two men are a handful of bodies, none stirring.

Patrick tries to pull himself up for a better look, but winces as he strains his leg.

JACK (CONT'D)

No point in that now. Here.

He corks the bottle and then tosses it to Patrick. Patrick catches it, propped up on one elbow. The distance between the two men is just large enough to make sharing a bottle difficult.

PATRICK

What is it?

JACK

The last of what I managed to bring with me.

Patrick uncorks the bottle and takes a sniff. It smells much like the bottles his father keeps in the cabinet at home. He takes a small drink. Then, bracing himself, a much larger one. Jack grins.

JACK (CONT'D)

I knew you were a hearty one.

PATRICK

Not hearty, just...Irish.

He immediately regrets sharing that information.

JACK

Irish. And American?

PATRICK

Aye. Are you not? American, I mean.

JACK  
Canadian.

This makes sense - there's a slight French tinge to his voice and his heavy boots seem more suited to snowy mountains than muddy battlefields.

PATRICK  
Oh. Then why are you...

JACK  
Love.

PATRICK  
Pardon?

JACK  
Give that here.

Patrick tosses the bottle back after corking it. Jack catches it with his good hand.

JACK (CONT'D)  
The woman I love is from Vermont.  
When her brother volunteered, it  
seemed only fair.

PATRICK  
You are married?

JACK  
Not yet. When I get back it will  
finally be official.

There's an unspoken "if" that hangs in the air between them.  
*If I get back.*

JACK (CONT'D)  
What is your name?

PATRICK  
*Padraig Doherty, sir.*

The words are heavy with an Irish lilt.

JACK  
Padraig?

PATRICK  
Yes sir. But, people mostly call me  
Patrick.

JACK

Ah. Making it easier for the Yanks,  
I see. Please, understand, I do the  
same. My mother named me *Jacques*,  
but American tongues struggle to do  
it justice. So, you may call me  
Jack. Jack *Boucher*.

The French becomes aggressive when he says his name, as if  
emphasizing its foreignness.

PATRICK

It is a pleasure to meet you, Jack.

JACK

The pleasure is mine, Patrick. I'm  
sure there is no finer company to  
have whilst rolling in the mud.

Patrick lets himself lay back down flat on the soft earth,  
looking up at the slowly appearing stars. Jack takes another  
drink.

JACK (CONT'D)

How old are you?

PATRICK

18, sir.

JACK

A fresh one, then. Got any family?

PATRICK

A mother and father, 2 sisters and  
3 brothers. You?

JACK

Only the ones I gain through my  
beloved Anne.

PATRICK

I see. She must be very proud of  
you.

JACK

What is the date?

PATRICK

The date, sir?

JACK

Yes, the date.



PATRICK  
April 5th. Or 6th, I suppose.

JACK  
Then I suppose she has just figured it out.

PATRICK  
What do you mean?

JACK  
She knows how long the train from Montreal typically takes, and I doubt she could convince herself that weather has delayed it this long.

PATRICK  
You mean, you left without telling her?

JACK  
Yes.

Jack sets the bottle down beside him and reaches into his coat. He inhales sharply as he brushes past his injured arm, finds a set of rosary beads, and pulls them out. He closes his eyes and begins to pray.

Patrick glances at him and frowns. He pulls out his own rosary from his breast pocket and studies them, fiddling with the beads in thought.

A long moment passes, Jack muttering in French and Patrick staring at the cross.

Then, Jack finishes praying, carefully tucking the beads back into his coat. He looks up to see Patrick still holding his beads.

JACK (CONT'D)  
I did not think I would find another soulless papist in the Union army.

This startles Patrick out of his reverie, causing him to almost drop the beads.

PATRICK  
I was not-well, I can't. I don't know.

JACK  
What?

PATRICK

I am just not a very good Catholic,  
I suppose.

JACK

It is difficult being a good  
Catholic anywhere, much less on  
this continent.

PATRICK

My mother would weep if she knew  
how little I prayed the rosary now.  
They came here so that their  
children could be faithful to God  
and yet I falter.

JACK

When God is all you can find hope  
in, it is almost easier. Once life  
is no longer endless struggle, that  
is when He challenges your faith  
most.

PATRICK

He challenges me but will not grant  
me the death in battle I deserve.

JACK

You think you deserve death?

PATRICK

I think a dead son forever  
ensconced in righteous combat is  
more useful to my parents than  
anything I could achieve in life.

A long moment passes between the two men. Jack takes another  
long drink from the bottle. The sun is steadily dropping down  
the horizon.

PATRICK (CONT'D)

I saw a woman in the woods.

JACK

A woman? Here?

PATRICK

I believe it was Saint Barbara that  
appeared before me. She carried the  
same rifle as I. Yet she was  
dressed in fine robes and had not a  
speck of dirt upon her.

JACK

Did she appear before or after your wound?

PATRICK

Before. Directly before.

JACK

Then it was a warning. One it seems you did not heed.

PATRICK

How could I have heeded a warning such as that? I did not place my thigh in that bullet's path on purpose.

JACK

It is not as if Saint Barbara would pluck the bullet from the air herself. Perhaps not a warning for you to heed, but rather a test.

PATRICK

A test? Of my faith.

JACK

Saint Barbara appears to you and moments later you are struck by rifle fire. Your suffering was ordained by the Lord.

PATRICK

To what end?

JACK

It has been said that a man who suffers in life is meant to receive a bountiful eternal reward.

PATRICK

What a way to make good people suffer in silence.

JACK

I hope it to be true. If it should be, I shall be a happy man in the beyond.

Jack takes another drink.

PATRICK

May I have some more?

Jack laughs, corks the bottle, and tosses it to Patrick once more. The bottle is now only a third full.

PATRICK (CONT'D)

Would you be very cross with me if I were to finish the bottle?

JACK

I suppose not, and even if I was it is not as though I could do anything about it now.

PATRICK

I do not wish to prematurely end our conversation. Without words, I fear the places my mind may drift.

JACK

Just finish the bottle. Perhaps your conversation then will be too engaging for me to ignore.

Patrick takes a deep breath and finishes the rest of the drink in the bottle.

PATRICK

Thank you.

JACK

It seems you needed it more than I.

Patrick looks at Jack's wounds and frowns.

JACK (CONT'D)

Not for that, but for this.

Jack points at his heart with his good hand.

PATRICK

I do not believe I have ever been drunk before.

JACK

When have you last ate?

PATRICK

Dinner, last night.

JACK

Then it might be your first true foray into the world of drink. Do you feel like a man yet?

PATRICK

I feel as though I am filled with molten lead rather than blood.

JACK

In my experience, that is close enough.

PATRICK

To be a man is to suffer, then.

JACK

A man, a woman, a Catholic, a Protestant, a human. It seems that suffering is what we do best.

PATRICK

Do you think you will die in this war?

JACK

As the hours stretch it becomes more and more likely.

Jack reaches into his coat with his good hand and some papers rustle.

JACK (CONT'D)

I have written a dozen goodbye letters to my dear Anne. Every time I hear we must engage the enemy, the words cannot stay in my mind. I wish I had put more time and effort into the one I wrote yesterday, but there is nothing to be done about that now.

PATRICK

I will deliver them all, if that is what you wish.

JACK

I doubt Anne should like to see the words driven from me when I expected to die. No, just this one.

Jack pulls a damp envelope from his jacket with his good hand.

PATRICK

Do not throw it, I worry it will get in the mud.

JACK

I shall leave it in my breast  
pocket here, if I die before the  
nurses fetch us.

He pockets the envelope in his right breast pocket, patting  
it twice.

PATRICK

I will deliver it. I swear.

JACK

I do believe my spirit would haunt  
you if you did not. I have no prior  
evidence of you being an honest  
man, but I suppose there is nothing  
to do about that now.

The sun is beginning to disappear beneath the horizon.  
Without it, the land is bathed in cool moonlight. The  
temperature has dropped significantly.

Patrick stares up at the starry night sky. Jack closes his  
eyes. Their words have grown strained and soft, as to not  
disturb the peace of the evening.

PATRICK

How did you know you were in love?

JACK

Loving is the most natural thing a  
person can do. There was no moment  
I knew, but instead I suddenly  
found myself knee deep in devotion  
to a singular woman. I cannot say  
when I began to sink, but I knew it  
would last until my death.

PATRICK

My parents wished for me to find a  
bride if I return from war. They  
said I should woo a good, Catholic  
girl and have many good, Catholic  
children.

JACK

They wish for you to be happy. And  
for you to be safe once they are  
gone.

PATRICK

I am not the eldest son I should  
be, others in town are beginning to  
notice.

JACK  
Notice what?

PATRICK  
Me. The way I am. The way I cannot  
throw myself wholeheartedly into  
the search for a wife.

JACK  
If it is meant to be, it shall be.

PATRICK  
If I were to die here, there would  
be no bride, no marriage, no  
children, and no disappointment.

JACK  
Perhaps.

PATRICK  
Why did you not tell your bride you  
were joining the war?

JACK  
Knowing my dear Anne, she would  
have bound her chest and joined me  
in training as soon as I told her.

PATRICK  
She would fight? Surely you would  
stop her.

JACK  
There are few things in this world  
that can stop that woman from doing  
something once she decides on it.

PATRICK  
You sound almost proud of her.

JACK  
It is unbecoming of a man to expect  
his love to bear the same arms as  
he, but my love blinds me to the  
conventions that keep women at the  
hearth and men in the fields.

PATRICK  
Are you not afraid to be called a  
coward? Allowing fair ladies to  
take up rifles and call themselves  
soldiers?

JACK  
Do you think me a coward?

PATRICK  
I suppose not.

JACK  
Saint Barbara comes to you holding  
a rifle and still you doubt the  
Lord's plan.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - LATER THAT NIGHT

The sun is now fully set. The two men are unmoved, largely  
due to their wounds. Patrick notices something now that the  
light is dim; his leg wound has a faint blue glow to it.

PATRICK  
Jack. Jack, what was in that  
bottle?

JACK  
Whiskey, mostly. But I have learned  
not to be strict with what drink I  
accept from others.

PATRICK  
Can you look at my leg?

JACK  
I know nothing of the body, I  
cannot help you.

PATRICK  
No, just look.

Jack opens his eyes and sees the same glow.

JACK  
Good Lord.

PATRICK  
You see it as well, then.

JACK  
Aye. Perhaps an angel. Perhaps  
another Saint has come to touch  
you.

PATRICK  
Do you have it also?



Patrick cranes his head, but struggles to get a good look at Jack.

JACK

No, it seems only the moon and yourself may glow on this night.

PATRICK

Am I dying?

JACK

I do not know.

PATRICK

Is this Saint Barbara once more?

JACK

I do not know.

PATRICK

Did the Lord hear my doubts and send a holy beam of light to curse me? Or is it a blessing to prove his good will?

JACK

Good Lord, kid, I do not know. And neither will you until a doctor looks at it.

PATRICK

I am not sure if I wish for a doctor's treatment.

JACK

If it is between the knife and the slow, painful death of gangrene, then I shall choose the knife every time.

PATRICK

I doubt there is enough whiskey in the world to prepare me for a surgery such as that.

JACK

You best make your peace with the bone saw now, before they put the belt in your mouth.

PATRICK

This glow must mean something  
though, the Lord above has chosen  
to touch my wound and spare me  
further suffering.

JACK

For your sake, I hope you are  
right.

The fatigue of the day has settled upon Jack, who tries to find a comfortable position to fall asleep in. Patrick stares at the glowing leg wound for some time before he too slips into unconsciousness.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - NIGHT

We have returned to the opening; a glowing figure striding amongst fallen soldiers. Except now it is clearly from Patrick's perspective, tracking a distant speck of glowing until it comes into clear view.

It is ST. SEBASTIAN (patron saint of wounded soldiers and holy Christian deaths), so perfect as to seem out of place in this battlefield of blood and dirt. He is dressed only in a scant robe that covers part of his torso and the front and back of his pelvis.

He appears in the style of Peter Paul Rubens' 1614 painting: handsome but punctured with arrows in the shoulder, torso, hip, and thigh. The arrow in his thigh is in the same position as Patrick's bullet wound.

The saint glides amongst the fallen, seeking out a particular figure in the mud. Patrick, unsure if he is dreaming, cannot decide if he should attempt to bow before the man or run for his life. St. Sebastian calmly approaches Patrick and kneels beside him.

Despite the mud, St. Sebastian lays his hand upon Patrick's wound, and, instead of searing pain, the glow grows in intensity and Patrick finds himself feeling calm. St. Sebastian strokes Patrick's cheek, leaning in. On a wild impulse, Patrick slightly sits up to move their faces closer together.

PATRICK

What are you?

ST. SEBASTIAN

You must not worry yourself with  
such matters.

PATRICK

I am sorry.

ST. SEBASTIAN

There is no need for apology,  
*Padraig.*

PATRICK

You say my name perfectly.

ST. SEBASTIAN

I know you like no other.

PATRICK

Why are you so beautiful?

ST. SEBASTIAN

I am what I am needed to be. In  
another life, in another time,  
perhaps things would have been  
different.

It seems for a moment that they may kiss, but St. Sebastian instead lays him back down. He kisses Patrick's forehead and removes his hand from his wound, the glow now flickering. Patrick begins slipping back into unconsciousness, and St. Sebastian rises to his feet.

Patrick is anointed. Dawn is rapidly approaching. The saint glides away once more.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - THE NEXT AFTERNOON

The point of a shovel pokes Patrick in the side and he jerks awake, jostling his leg wound. THE GRAVE DIGGER (40s, in work clothes) stands over him.

THE GRAVE DIGGER

Boys, we need a stretcher over  
here!

Jack groans, trying to stretch the sleepiness out of his bones but only aggravating his wounds in the process.

THE GRAVE DIGGER (CONT'D)

Make that two.

The grave digger kneels down in between the two men.

THE GRAVE DIGGER (CONT'D)

We will get you both to the field  
hospital, don't worry.

JACK  
The graybacks?

THE GRAVE DIGGER  
They fled once the Army of Ohio  
arrived and turned them back.

4 men holding stretchers have arrived and begin to put Patrick and Jack on their respective stretcher. The grave digger nods to the two men, shoulders his shovel, and moves to the next fallen soldier.

Patrick and Jack are carried back to the field hospital and laid on cots next to one another.

INT. FIELD HOSPITAL - CONTINUOUS

Nurses and doctors flit amongst the wounded, applying poultices and bandages wherever needed.

PATRICK  
Did you see him too?

JACK  
Him?

PATRICK  
That beautiful man who emerged from  
the dark.

JACK  
I think the drink blessed you with  
a nice dream to distract you from  
every thing that has happened.

PATRICK  
He felt so real.

JACK  
That is the nature of dreams, to  
feel real and yet showcase wild  
fantasy.

PATRICK  
He touched my leg and it glowed.

JACK  
Ah so that was real. I thought  
perhaps I had dreamed that.

PATRICK  
It shown as bright as a star and I  
felt at peace.

(MORE)

PATRICK (CONT'D)

I think perhaps it was Saint Sebastian. The arrows in his side, it could not be anyone else.

JACK

Two saints in one day. The Lord must be sending you a strong message.

PATRICK

Strong, yes. But good?

JACK

Only time will tell.

A DOCTOR (40s, white coat smeared in blood) and THE NURSE (20s, same actor as St. Barbara) approach Patrick's bedside. The doctor begins to examine his leg wound, eliciting a wince from Patrick, while the nurse wipes the dirt from his face.

DOCTOR

You're very lucky, son. Seems you have narrowly avoided needing the leg removed. The bullet passed through neatly.

(to the nurse)

Clean his wound and wrap it.

The doctor moves on to Jack, examining his many wounds. The nurse uses a rag and a bowl of warm water to clean around and then in the wound.

THE NURSE

How are you feeling?

PATRICK

Hungry.

THE NURSE

We will get you food once your leg is bandaged. I have a rather odd question for you, if you do not mind.

PATRICK

Yes?

THE NURSE

Did you see anything last night, in the battlefield?

PATRICK

You saw the man too?

THE NURSE

Man? No, I meant the glowing wounds.

PATRICK

Oh, yes, I did see it. My leg was glowing.

THE NURSE

How wonderful. The angels have protected your leg from amputation.

PATRICK

Angels.

THE NURSE

Yes, it is all anyone can discuss. Seems every other soldier is convinced that their wounds were glowing as bright as a star when the sun set.

PATRICK

Do you believe them?

THE NURSE

I do. I think the Lord has spared these brave men any further suffering. Was it another soldier you saw?

PATRICK

No, it was—it was a dream. I dreamed I saw a man walk across a field.

Beside them, Jack is put onto another stretcher and taken to another section of the medical tent.

PATRICK (CONT'D)

Where are they taking him?

THE NURSE

Not everyone shares in your fortune. They must remove part of his arm.

PATRICK

Will he survive?

THE NURSE

If the Good Lord wills it.

There's a flurry of activity out of eyesight of Patrick, and the nurse keeps her back to it. Shouting, the scraping of metal tools, and then the pained screams of Jack.

THE NURSE (CONT'D)

Many have died on this day, you are lucky to be spared. And to keep your leg must be a blessing from the Lord Himself.

Jack's screams are pained, but he never begs for respite. Rather, he yells for them to finish the procedure quickly. Patrick closes his eyes and attempts to block out the sound.

PATRICK

Do you enjoy being a nurse?

THE NURSE

Enjoy is perhaps the wrong word. I felt a calling, to help the Union Army find victory. To care for the brave men who fight for our freedoms such as yourself.

PATRICK

I do not feel brave.

THE NURSE

You are whether you feel it or not.

PATRICK

Only a coward would feel relief at the prospect of being sent home.

THE NURSE

The life you have been blessed with here today is a gift. Your responsibility now is to make it count. In honor of those who did not have the same luck as you.

Jack's yells reach a fever pitch, then a deep cracking noise is heard and the screams suddenly stop. The silence is heavy, only punctured by the calm communication amongst the doctors and nurses.

THE NURSE (CONT'D)

Do not worry about your friend. The doctors know what they are doing.

PATRICK

Why does he not scream? Surely the pain is unbearable.

## THE NURSE

Some harm their throats and cannot  
scream any longer. Others simply  
realize that their screams can do  
nothing to halt the suffering.

The nurse finishes bandaging his wound, and takes her bowl and rag away with her to the next patient. Patrick lays in his cot, looking up to the roof of the tent while his letter home, written shortly after these events, is narrated aloud.

## PATRICK (V.O.)

Dearest Mother and Father, with any  
luck this letter shall reach you  
only a few days before my own  
person. I have been honorably  
discharged and sent home to you, as  
whole as any soldier could hope to  
be. My commanding officers praised  
me for my bravery in battle. I hope  
you can summon even a fraction of  
the pride they laid upon my  
shoulders within yourself for your  
eldest son.

MONTAGE: Patrick on the train, then greeting his family at their house. He hugs his mother and shakes his fathers hand. His siblings embrace him enthusiastically.

## PATRICK (V.O.)

I worry you think I run from this  
war; please know, the doctors say I  
have suffered a grave injury that  
would have taken my leg if not my  
life were it not for the Good  
Lord's intervention. He watched  
over me, sending angels to tend to  
my wounds when there was no one  
else.

MONTAGE: Jack returning home to Anne, one arm amputated. Anne weeps with joy that he is home and they embrace.

## PATRICK (V.O.)

The men I met on the field shall  
live in my heart forever, their  
kindness kept me sane in the dark  
hours of the evening.

MONTAGE: Patrick marrying a woman, a small ceremony. Later, Patrick and his wife with their first child. He has a large family, and he looks happy.



PATRICK (V.O.)

Do not concern yourself about me, I intend to come home and build a life for myself. I will never forget what has happened to me on this day. People shall know the tale of the Battle of Shiloh, and they shall know that our Lord is capable of great pain but also great blessing. It is impossible to doubt your faith when it has stared you in the face. To be a soldier is to suffer at the hands of fate so that the world may be brighter the next day.

MONTAGE: Patrick on his own farm, now a grown man with a family. He looks out at the sunset, catching a glimpse of a figure in the distance. Saint Sebastian is there, eyes full of melancholy pride.

*In another life, in another time, perhaps things would have been different.*

Patrick nods to him. Then, the saint is gone.

PATRICK (V.O.)

I know this now, with my whole person, that I was meant to be struck on the battlefield that day. I was meant to see the glow and know the Lord had touched me. Saint Sebastian came to me and laid the Angel's Glow upon me.