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Gregory A. Daddis
Chapman University, daddis@chapman.edu

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Historiographical Essay

Mansplaining Vietnam: Male Veterans and America's Popular Image of the Vietnam War

Gregory A. Daddis

Abstract

Of the more than 3 million Americans who deployed to Southeast Asia during the United States' involvement in the Vietnamese civil war, only some 7,500 were women. Thus, it seems reasonable that memoirs, novels, and film would privilege the male experience when remembering the Vietnam War. Yet in the aftermath of South Vietnam's collapse, Americans' memory of the war narrowed even further, equating the conflict as a whole to the male combat veteran's story. This synthetic literary review examines some of the more lasting works sustaining the popular narrative of Vietnam, one that was constructed, in substantial part, by veterans themselves and one in which the male voice reigned supreme.

The male combat soldier long has been a staple of American war literature. Both memoirs and fictional accounts of war have tended to focus on the experience of men in battle because battle is the most exciting part of war and, until recently, battle was principally a male activity. In large sense, the literature of the American experience in Vietnam proved no different. Even though many Vietnam vets parted company with their forefathers, sharing bitter memories of suffering and loss for what they saw as a questionable cause, they nonetheless

sought the same personal meaning, the same affirmation of manhood, as those citizen-soldiers who came before them.

As these male veterans struggled to tell their own stories in the aftermath of the United States' long, failed war in Vietnam, they, like their World War II predecessors, commanded the postwar popular narrative, even if it was increasingly, and hotly, debated. In fact, even before the last American troops departed South Vietnam in March 1973, the ferocity of the war's history had begun to rival the conflict itself. Men unsurprisingly fired these opening salvos over wartime memory and tribute. Of the roughly 3 million Americans deployed to Southeast Asia during the United States' involvement in the Vietnamese civil war, the number of women never rose above 3 percent of those serving. Strangely, despite this comparatively small percentage, the sum total of female veterans remains a disputed figure to this day.

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, roughly 7,500 women wore their nation's uniform between 1962 and 1973 while deployed to Vietnam. Other sources, like the Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation, place the number much higher, suggesting that nearly 10,000 women served on active duty in theater. The disparity itself seems telling. Might the conflicting figures intimate deeper questions about how Americans and their government defined the term "veteran" both during and after the Vietnam War?

Even when accepting the discrepancies of these "official" figures, it seemed to make sense that postwar memoirs, novels, films, and eventually scholarly histories would give preference to the male experience. By overall numbers and type of service, popular assumptions held, women's contributions paled in comparison to the sacrifices of men.


3. Within this contested tally of those who served, most women vets were nurses, a traditionally female role for wartime service. Once more, though, the numbers range far afield, from 4,000 to 15,000 women serving in the armed forces nursing corps. See Mary T. Samecky, A History of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 387–88; and Elizabeth M. Norman, Women at War: The Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 3–4.
While these male-dominated accounts followed a pattern reminiscent of the U.S. Civil War (1861-65) and World War II (1941-45), in other ways Vietnam veterans proved far more willing to share their reflections about the nature and purpose of their war. Instead of reinvigorating and reaffirming the standard national narrative of supreme individual sacrifices in the pursuit of a just cause, key volumes in the literature tended to coalesce around the notion of Vietnam as a futile, empty war in which American combat soldiers were asked to sacrifice all for something far less meaningful.

Despite this hallmark of many autobiographical accounts, though, Americans' collective memory of Vietnam nonetheless continued to privilege the male combat veteran's story. Moreover, frequent entries into this narrative rested on a time-honored assumption: only male vets who engaged with the enemy on Vietnam's battlefields could grasp the "real war." In the process, at least some men tended to "play down women's efforts in the war," conveniently ignoring the fact that some 75 percent of American troops never actually engaged in combat.

In fact, the construction of a male-dominated memory began even as U.S. troops were departing from, and dissenting against, the war in Vietnam. Of the more than 100 veterans and sixteen civilians who presented testimony at the January 1971 "Winter Soldier Investigation" detailing American atrocities in Vietnam, only four were women. More revealing, however, was the testimony of U.S. Navy lieutenant John F. Kerry before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that April. Speaking on behalf of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), Kerry argued that the United States had "created a monster" in Vietnam, young American men who had returned home "with a sense of anger and a sense of betrayal which no one has yet grasped." The intimations were clear. Only men who had been "taught to deal and to trade in violence" could ever understand the horrors of war. Subordinated within, if not expunged from, such narratives were the painful memories of female veterans equally "haunted by what happened to us, what we saw, what went on, why it happened." 5


While combat veteran memoirists and novelists may not have set out to keep alive the kind of heroic masculine image of citizen-soldiers that undergirded American confidence and resolve during World War II and the early Cold War, the nearly exclusive focus on the travails of the combat infantrymen ended up lending credence to that very image.

In an important way, then, male veterans' stories could be repurposed when convenient to do so. Certainly, the memories of veterans that were reflected in popular culture mark Vietnam as a dark chapter in American history—a traumatizing conflict that inflicted enormous psychic damage on those who served and on the larger nation they represented. Yet that same popular memory, highlighting a predominantly masculine way of war, also afforded opportunities to reemphasize culturally comfortable paradigms on women, warfare, and American manhood in the waning decades of the twentieth century. 7

This literary review examines and synthesizes some of the more lasting works sustaining the popular narrative of Vietnam, one that was constructed, in substantial part, by veterans themselves and one in which the male voice reigned supreme. Despite accounts emphasizing the shameful, immoral behavior of ordinary soldiers and marines, a rebirth narrative nonetheless endured in many of these storylines. Americans thus could remember the war, though lost, as one in which men still demonstrated the martial qualities of their fathers' greatest generation during World War II.

The key element of this rebirth narrative—a narrow focus on the male infantry combat soldier—held important implications as the United States grappled with questions of national honor and confidence in the Cold War era's final years. Broken warriors could heal and mature into a new generation of patriotic Americans able to defend freedom across the globe. In this way, the narrative went beyond making sense of veterans' postwar traumas and the rejuvenation of patriarchal norms at home.8 Without question, fears of degenerating masculinity infused popular

7. On popular notions maintaining social order, see Enloe, Does Khaki Become You?; 7. Karen Gottschang Turner and Phan Thanh Hao have argued that nations “recovering from war all too often put women’s issues on the back burner”; Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 186. Importantly, Turner and Hao illustrate that Vietnamese women on the communist side also experienced contradictions between the idea of who could fight and the reality of who in a culture truly represented a soldier.

8. Susan Jeffords speaks of a regeneration of patriarchy in the war’s aftermath in The Re-masculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
Male Veterans' Narrative of the Vietnam War

postwar debates in the 1970s and 1980s. So too did representations of Vietnam as the “Bad War” in contrast to World War II’s enshrinement as the “Good War.”

Yet postwar commemorations of the male warrior also afforded savvy veterans and policymakers a convenient tool for representing military might and masculinity as an integral component of American resurgence in the mid-1980s. Postwar memoirs might challenge paradigms about the nature of America’s role in the world and, sometimes, even the nobility of America’s servicemen. But by the Reagan presidency (1981–89), the war in Vietnam increasingly could be portrayed as a crucible through which resilient men had passed and, like their forebears, proven their manhood.

Boys Go to War...

Of all American wars in the twentieth century, the one in Vietnam stood apart. It remained an aberration of sorts, a long, unsatisfying conflict without the traditional narrative arc of crisis, struggle, redemption, and victory. Unlike their World War II citizen-soldier fathers who defeated evil in the defense of democracy, Vietnam veterans had fought in what many Americans believed had been a “bad war.” There were few heroes of the ilk of a Patton or an Eisenhower. There were few opportunities to display one’s manhood in a manner befitting, for instance, those heroic defenders at the Battle of the Bulge. Thus, the popular narrative concluded as did the war—in an unsatisfying manner. South Vietnam never seemed to meet its obligations of maturing into a true democratic state. The struggle had ended not in a clear-cut military victory, but rather in a negotiated settlement that left communist soldiers occupying South Vietnamese territory. As one father told his son after returning from Vietnam, “You guys ain’t really veterans, you didn’t win the war. You didn’t win your war.”


9. Of course, one could argue that the Korean War (1950–53) also lacked heroes and a moment of obvious victory. It, too, ended in a “negotiated settlement.” Yet that war hardly matches the one in Vietnam in terms of its impact on the public consciousness of America. Bruce Cumings tackles the memory of the earlier conflict in The Korean War: A History (New York: Modern Library, 2010).


11. Father quoted in Christian G. Appy, Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and
Unsurprisingly, many veterans who had "lost" their war sought blame elsewhere, mostly at home. They cast a wide net indeed. Weak politicians had fought the war "halfway" while ignoring or overriding the counsel of military professionals. A biased media had contributed to a negative view of the war thanks to reports filled with "errors, misinterpretations, judgments, and falsehoods." The "non-conformism of a libertarian society" had seeped into the military ranks, to the point where unpatriotic antiwar dissenters were resisting not only at home, but in Vietnam as well. Even famed pediatric doctor Benjamin Spock, a "leftist who parades with bearded peace marchers," could become a target not only by protesting the war, but also by helping raise an undisciplined generation of "permissive" youth. As one returning veteran summed it up, "The only thing we lost over there was the support of our countrymen back here." 

But blaming others did little to assuage the internal trauma of sacrificing for seemingly no tangible result, of Vietnam vets finding themselves outcasts in American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) halls. One marine thought he would come home and be a "really tough guy and ... heroic, you know. But it was nothing like that." Another veteran believed he and his peers had gone to Vietnam "as frightened, lonely young men," only to return, "alone again, as immigrants to a new world." Moreover, national headlines unfairly labeled them as damaged psychotics, arriving back to the United States with little purpose and inclined to heavy drug use. The New York Times declared in late 1972 that "Postwar Shock Besets Veterans of Vietnam," while the Los Angeles Times asked two years later how many vets were ticking "time bombs." One Veterans Administration (VA) official even suggested these soldiers' "potential for violence is of grave concern to them and should be of even greater concern to the whole country." 


Thus, both draftees who had served their yearlong tours in Vietnam and professionals remaining in uniform after war’s end desperately needed an alternative, more positive, depiction of the returning warrior. The overseas conflict may have come to a discouraging conclusion, but veterans returning home should not be made to suffer for that outcome. In large sense, then, these soldiers were seeking “peace with honor” on individual and collective levels just as the Nixon administration (1969-74) had sought one on the national level.

In a carefully constructed narrative, “honor” could still come from men acting courageously in battle, even at places like Hamburger Hill, which had demonstrated the war’s futility to so many. The May 1969 battle near the South Vietnamese–Laotian border pitted American soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division (and South Vietnamese from the 1st ARVN Regiment) against well-defended North Vietnamese regulars. Casualties ran high on both sides. Some 70 U.S. soldiers died; more than 370 others were wounded. Body counts tallied more than 600 enemy dead. Yet almost immediately, American forces departed the war-torn area, leaving behind a blood-soaked landscape at Dong Ap Bia and a political firestorm back in Washington, D.C. Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) denounced the U.S. casualties as “senseless and irresponsible,” railing against senior officers who seemingly did not understand that “American boys are too valuable to be sacrificed for a false sense of military pride.”16 Such remonstrations, however, missed a key point. The deaths were not in vain if Americans could use the battle to honor individual soldiers’ courage and sacrifice in an increasingly unpopular war.

Viewing Hamburger Hill as a microcosm for the larger conflict, one still could marvel at the courage needed to assault, numerous times, a heavily defended enemy bunker system. (Of course, similar efforts by the enemy were dismissed as attacks by suicidal fanatics.) Was not one lieutenant colonel, commanding a battalion on the hill, correct when he argued “Nobody ever won a war by trying to avoid combat”? Should we not admire the platoon leader’s brave men who “fought under some extremely difficult conditions and conducted themselves with honor as soldiers are supposed to do”? It seems nearly impossible to read Lieutenant Frank Boccia’s memoirs of the fighting and not be left wondering how soldiers could even function under the “spitting barks of the M16s” and the “hammering of the M60s” which “merged into a sheet of sound, a smothering curtain of noise.”17

August 1974. As one veteran recalled, “I keep getting my face rubbed in the Vietnam war every time I turn on the TV or open the newspaper.” In Isaacs, Vietnam Shadows, 29.


Given such inspiring accounts, later critics of the war thus could blame senior policymakers or military officers for implementing a misguided strategy, yet still accentuate the bravery of young men in battle.

In fact, such discourse formed a cornerstone of the 1987 eponymous film. John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill* purposefully contrasted hardened infantrymen in Vietnam against antiwar protestors and draft resisters at home. The movie's advertising was far from subtle, its tag line declaring "War at its worst. Men at their best." Irvin, however, went further by setting the actions of those engaged in combat above all others. In one revealing scene, a media crew attempts to interview soldiers descending the hill's slope after a tough engagement with the enemy. One of the platoon's sergeants, played by Dylan McDermott, snarls at a questioning correspondent in clean, pressed fatigues, calling him a "vulture" for hoping to take photographs of dead soldiers. And because the newsman hasn't "taken a side"—"You probably don't even do your own fucking," the sergeant grows—he ranks lower than even the North Vietnamese soldiers defending the mount. Only real men deserve a place on this hallowed ground. "You haven't earned the right to be here," the exhausted noncommissioned officer (NCO) declares.18

By the late 1980s, Irvin's construction of the masculine infantryman had become accepted as the archetypal experience of nearly all Vietnam veterans. Throughout the evolution of this popular narrative, women became marginalized from the larger war story. Even though American female soldiers, in fact, had taken sides, they, like Irvin's camera crew, had mostly seen only the aftermath of battle. Women had not participated in it alongside the true warriors. While a few voices contested this storyline, arguing that female veterans "saw the worst of the war" by serving as nurses and confronting an "endless procession of mangled bodies across the operating table," they hardly commanded mainstream portrayals of Vietnam.19 Instead, contemporary newspapers and magazines emphasized how female marines "all carry regulation red lipstick" and that women on active duty were excelling as "typewriter soldiers." Perhaps most importantly, these were "not ardent feminists pleading for equality of the sexes on the battlefield." Thus, the infantryman's station as masculine warrior could remain unchallenged.20


Yet women serving in support roles and thus never comprehending the “real” war remained ancillary to the larger, popular narrative. An added assumption undergirded the storyline. Only men could be empowered by war, even in a miscarried one like Vietnam. There were, of course, uncomfortable paradoxes to be managed. In reality, war broke veterans, at the same time supposedly turning them into men. In particular, many returning Vietnam vets, derided for “losing” their war, felt more like victims than victors, their manhood questioned rather than bolstered. True, a few works noted these incongruities. Michael Herr’s oftentimes surreal *Dispatches* highlighted soldiers less interested in victory and more obsessed with time. “No one ever talked about When-this-lousy-war-is-over. Only ‘How much time you got?’” Likewise, Mark Baker’s *Nam*, a collection of oral testimonies, suggested an insidious lie underwrote the war’s popular narrative. “The war was billed on the marquee as a John Wayne shoot-'em-up test of manhood,” according to Baker, but turned out to be a “warped version” of *Peter Pan*. “Vietnam was a brutal Neverneverland, outside time and space, where little boys didn’t grow up. They just grew old before their time.”

Such contradictions surely could be incorporated into the script, but the more famous of men’s memoirs remained traditional stories of a band of brothers displaying the time-honored traits of battlefield courage, sacrifice, and love for one’s comrades. Rarely did the voices of male support troops, “REMFs,” come into view and, rarer still, those of women. In part, they weren’t needed. John Ketwig’s ... and a hard rain fell illustratively described these proxy homosocial bonds. “As the strongest steel is tempered by fire, you knew the friendships made in this pressure-cooker atmosphere were special.” In *Pharaoh’s Army* relates a similar connection, Tobias Wolff recounting a tender moment when a sergeant cleaned his wounds with “a touch as gentle as a woman’s.” Even Lieutenant General Harold G. Moore’s account of the famous 1965 battle in the Ia Drang Valley opens with a confessional that “transcendent love came to us unbidden on the battlefields, as it does in every war man has ever fought.”

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22. John Ketwig, ... and a hard rain fell: A GI’s true story of the War in Vietnam (Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks, 2002), 47. One veteran, speaking of a dear friend in combat, noted, “It’s a closeness you never had before. It’s closer than your mother and father.” In *Shay, Achilles in Vietnam*, 40. “REMF” was a derisive term for support troops—Rear Echelon Mother Fuckers.

This closeness between men in battle did not suppress memoirists from sharing the dark underbelly of combat, even if they largely ignored meaningful representations of the Vietnamese or saw violence against civilians, like that at My Lai, as an aberration. Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* takes his readers through a transformational arc from glory-seeking youth to emotionally spent veteran. As the marine lieutenant conceded, “not thinking” was the “secret to emotional survival in war.” In *Once a Warrior King*, David Donovan intimated the constant level of stress caused by fighting in a war without front lines. “We learned to trust no one, not even the children.”24 Even Ketwig admitted that he “had survived, but without the resiliency of youth. If this was manhood, I would have preferred to remain a child.” But such disclosures sat uneasily beside the culturally dominant model of men in battle. As Caputo confessed, near the end of his book, enduring “petty regulations” and “discomforts and degradations” was worth it “just to experience a single moment when a group of soldiers under your command and in the extreme stress of combat do exactly what you want them to do, as if they are extensions of yourself.”25 Perhaps Caputo’s exhilaration helps explain why alternative “peace with honor” narratives never gained a foothold in the public consciousness. Veterans could have emphasized all sorts of American efforts in Vietnam besides combat—nation-building programs, the training of local military forces and government officials, or the work of volunteer services providing assistance to teachers, farmers, or community leaders. Certainly, U.S. advisors working in nonmilitary programs lamented that their “war” received “very little attention from the news media, the war that has no major battles or any great victories.”26 Likely, too many ambiguities within the local struggle for Vietnamese political loyalties prevented such a focus. If combat was not the common experience for most veterans, a conventional male story centered upon battle at least made sense to Americans coming to grips with their experiences in Southeast Asia. In the process, veterans themselves tended to denigrate “all that bullshit about winning the hearts and minds of the people.” Thus, even stories supposedly flaunting the allied pacification effort—like marine captain “Bing” West’s *The Village*—placed far more emphasis on military engagements against the insurgent National Liberation Front (NLF).27


Of course, telling the story of Vietnam in a certain way was utilitarian for both career soldiers and draftees. Professionals could prove their personal worth in combat by sharing how they "fought side-by-side and led battle-hardened veterans and brave young men who served valiantly, whose joie de vivre and dedication to duty underwrote victory in every battle we fought."28 Such narratives equally could help conscripts make sense of sacrifices rendered for what too many Americans saw as a meaningless war. By homing in on men victorious in battle, gender could be employed in such a way to empower, to restore respect and authority within veterans of a lost conflict. The postwar discourse, in one sense, thus might be seen as a palliative for all male veterans, not just those who saw combat. In contesting the imagery of the maladjusted warrior who posed a danger to society, men could regain their standing at home while reinforcing cultural patterns of a male-dominated, hierarchical society.29

Even before war's end, gender constructs helped narrow culturally accepted discourse. Male veterans in the VVAW, protesting U.S. foreign policy and the war that was damaging them, held credence over those antiwarriors—hippies, "spoiled, gutless middle class" college kids, and communist sympathizers—who were lumped together as effeminate nonveterans. Shying away from criticizing vets, Vice President Spiro Agnew blasted protestors in late 1969 as "an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals."30 One antiwar marcher recalled that he heard taunts of "faggots' or 'queers' as often as 'commies' or 'cowards.'" (Famously, Boston's draft resistance movement employed inverse logic by declaring "Girls Say 'Yes' to Guys Who Say 'No.'") Thus, even in protest, at least some veterans could exploit the image of men in uniform as a way of shielding themselves against accusations of unpatriotic femininity.31

31. Taunts in Gerzon, Choice of Heroes, 46. On the relationships between the antiwar and
Without question, the Nixon administration realized the political risks in criticizing the VVAW. Never mind reports surfacing of dissatisfaction, even resistance, within the military ranks and of the army’s supposed (though overblown) collapse in Vietnam. The uniform bestowed clout on men and allowed them to influence, even if only temporarily in the early 1970s, the popular wartime narrative. In April 1971, more than 1,000 veterans marched on Washington, D.C., for protests that ranged from a sit-in at the Supreme Court to Kerry’s speech before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Then, on Friday the twenty-third, scores of vets discarded their medals, ribbons, and awards citations on the steps of the U.S. Capitol building. Such a public display of protest came hard for some. As one VVAW member wrote, “My parents told me that if I turned in my medals that they never wanted anything more to do with me. That’s not an easy thing to take,” the vet shared. “I still love my parents.” Yet the casting off of these patriotic symbols allowed soldiers, even those dissenting against the war, to redirect public discourse away from the recent South Vietnamese incursion into Laos and back onto the American veteran who had sacrificed so much.32

These jarring images of the uniformed dissenter also shed light on who was allowed to speak about war. In short, only men who had battled in the arena could contest foreign policy decisions because they had earned that right. Only they had seen the inconsistencies between policy and practice in Southeast Asia. Because they had lived through a war exposing the myth of John Wayne heroics on the battlefield, only they could debunk the movie star as an imposter. Even legendary pugilist Muhammad Ali, epitome of the man in the ring, had not earned that right. Refusing induction into the armed forces in April 1967, the boxing champion was stripped of his license and received a five-year prison sentence and a $10,000 fine.33


Thus, the popular narrative's foundation of the American war in Vietnam had been set early on. Even before war's end, the “authentic” story of Vietnam already was becoming a male combat veteran story. Those men who had not experienced the heat of battle—a much larger percentage of the U.S. armed forces in Vietnam—receded into the background, forcibly drowned out by a collective tale of men overcoming adversity in the jungles and rice paddies of a war-torn land. Women, when rarely present, remained in supporting roles, both at home and abroad, their struggles in dealing with the excesses of war failing to gain traction within the popular discourse. One female captain, for instance, who wore her bronze star during veterans’ parades, was constantly asked if the medal belonged to her husband. Another nurse recalled she never felt like she “was part of the war effort.”

If this rather exclusionary narrative benefited some vets over others, former Gls also had to challenge competing notions that they were psychologically damaged or, worse, emasculated by a lost war. Even if they were—and, indeed, many were “psychologically hurt”—the best way for veterans to rehabilitate themselves was to preference stories of battlefield courage, valor, and honor. True, not all veterans’ accounts glorified “masculine” virtue. But the combat veteran with the most dramatic and compelling story to tell might serve, in a fashion typical of past wars, as a basis for honoring his brothers and their sacrifices. Even in an unpopular war like Vietnam.

... but (Broken) Men Come Home

Most certainly, the era in which this gender-specific memory began matters. The ending of America’s war in Vietnam coincided with the onset of the all-volunteer force (AVF) and, consequently, the end of national conscription. Coupled with a wave of feminist challenges to gender-based discriminatory practices in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the AVF promised new opportunities for women to serve in the traditionally male profession of arms. As a result, alarmed men bemoaned “suppression of their manhood” and the “decline of manliness.” Worse, it seemed, the Los Angeles Times labeled women marines serving in the early 1970s as a “liberation army,” further contesting social norms, not from outside the military but from within. The Corps might still be “looking for a few good men,” but clearly these “gals,” as the Times


35. Unsurprisingly, though often not reported, women too were “psychologically hurt” by the war. See Walker, Piece of My Heart, 70. On the building of this “illusion of a collective experience,” see Jeffords, Remasculinization of America, 25.

called them, aroused fears that masculinity might no longer flourish in mixed-gender military units. Subsequently, male soldiers were left with a worrisome question. What would happen to men if they no longer felt “like heroes”?37

These anxieties of diminishing masculinity, both physical and psychological, were borne out in the memoirs of veterans who felt deceived by policymakers sending them off to war. Nowhere was this more evident than in Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*. A disabled former marine, Kovic became a vocal wheelchair-bound antiwar activist who wrote in such a way that gained readers’ sympathy for those sacrificing so much for an unappreciative nation. He “wanted people to understand ... to share with them as nakedly and openly and intimately as possible” what he had gone through. But such aspirations seemed hopeless for those who had not served. Kovic could not tell his parents about the worst of his VA hospital experiences, his visits to the enema room or the catheter in his penis. Nor did the government seem to appreciate his plight, the same government that kept “asking money for weapons” while it left Kovic and his ward mates “lying in our own filth.” This torment becomes palpable as the author bewails giving his “dead swinging dick for America,” only pages later to recount being told by a hospital aide that “Vietnam don’t mean nothin’ to me or any of these other people.”38

Other veterans could tell similar stories by fictionalizing a male-centric world in which women had few, if any, opportunities to challenge the assumption that only men in combat understood war. In James Webb’s *Fields of Fire*, marines operating in the northernmost portions of South Vietnam “accept the pain that others feared and dreaded” because that was “the ticket to ... dignity.” *Paco’s Story*, by Larry Heinemann, alternatively offered a sexualized version of the veteran’s tale by depicting the handful of women through an extremely narrow lens—a Vietcong woman gang-raped by U.S. soldiers, a Bangkok prostitute, an American nurse giving oral sex to the broken warrior, a local Texas town “punch board,” and a college girl having sex with her boyfriend yet spying on the wounded, veteran protagonist.39 Even when that lens was redirected on women, as in Bobbie Ann


Mason's *In Country*, the message remains familiar. When young Sam tries to identify with her father, killed in Vietnam, her journey is deemed futile. Both Sam's veteran uncle and his peers tell her pointedly to stop thinking about the war. "There is no way you can ever understand. So just forget it. Unless you've been humping the boonies, you don't know." 40

Film renditions in the mid-1970s and into the 1980s proved no different. Women play their assigned roles as newlyweds or girlfriends in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* or as sexy cheerleaders and targets of armed helicopter raids in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. In stories extolling the victimization of the combat soldier in Vietnam—Oliver Stone's *Platoon* and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* to name but two—women are far from central to the story. Kubrick certainly did more here than other directors, juxtaposing the Vietnamese prostitute who would do "everything" for ten dollars against the female insurgent sniper who exacts a heavy toll on a marine platoon. 41 Yet female voices remained tangential to understanding the war and the veteran's healing process afterward. In Hal Ashby's *Coming Home*, it is the disabled vet who sexually empowers Jane Fonda's character, Sally, not the other way around. Moreover, in *First Blood*, directed by Ted Kotcheff, no women appear, Sylvester Stallone's Rambo consoled only by the Special Forces colonel standing in as father figure. Even in the more recent *We Were Soldiers*, Hal Moore's wife fulfills the traditional maternal role back on the home front, supporting grieving spouses while caring for her warrior husband's children. 42


The central assumption in all these plot constructions remained constant. Only combat infantrymen had experienced the true stresses of war and thus suffered most, perhaps even exclusively, from postwar trauma. Perhaps this explains why cases of “stolen valor” became more prevalent by the early 1980s as some vets “invented false war records” to gain sympathy from a public increasingly more inclined to see the veteran as victim rather than “some raving sickie who shoots up women and kids in the streets.”

Who, among the nonveteran community, was qualified to contest the feelings of rage and remorse within ex-soldiers? Thus, as Vietnam slowly fell into history, popular narratives on veterans were transforming. The fact that the war had changed these men, had taken their “dignity away” and turned them into “animals,” called for compassion and acceptance, not ridicule and fear. And yet the “broken” veteran was almost always a man and, within the dominant discourse, therefore only he could truly know what war was like.

Throughout this process, the stresses of war became, in a sense, a spatial concept—only on male-dominated battlefields could one experience the true horrors of war. Faceless civilians, especially Vietnamese ones, oddly did not factor much into these narratives. Their victimization somehow paled in comparison to that of the U.S. infantryman. Even though, in one historian’s words, fighting in Vietnam never possessed “unities of time, place, or action,” a homogenizing effect took place in postwar storytelling that elevated the combat soldier into the paradigm of the veteran experience. Within this sphere of memory, women found little space. Perhaps it was because, as World War II veteran J. Glenn Gray asserted, war “always signifies an artificial separation of the sexes, or, at best, a maldistribution.” Or perhaps it was because too many veterans, male and female alike, agreed that women “theoretically” could hold “command authority” over men, but in practice during wartime, not so much. Thus, the battlefield itself, even in a war without front lines, legitimized, and thus advanced, the voices of male veterans.

So too did a sense of national guilt by the early 1980s. In what would become a revisionist pillar universalized by a charismatic president, Ronald Reagan declared

Vietnam vets had fought in a "noble cause" that demanded the nation's respect. In fact, Reagan's predecessor already had laid the groundwork for such claims. On Veteran's Day in 1978, Jimmy Carter praised Vietnam soldiers as "no less brave because our Nation was divided about that war." The American people actually owed these veterans a "special debt." Reagan went further, exalting these "patriots who lit the world with their fidelity and courage." Arguing that Vietnam was a righteous cause helped ensure the American home front would express moral gratitude to those who seemed to have suffered most from war. In the process, honoring the combat veteran, promoting his story over all others, became, in a sense, a ritual, an unthinking, yet socially admissible, reaction to the war. The male voice had now become, almost reflexively by the mid-1980s, the dominant one in telling America's story of the long war in Vietnam.

Leading male characters in 1980s plotlines consequently could re-embrace their masculinity. Talk of "American impotence" or a "wounded machismo" fell by the wayside. Thus, in revenge fantasies like Sylvester Stallone's second outing as Rambo (1985) and the Chuck Norris Missing in Action films, moviegoers once more could relish the "ideal 'cowboy' hero representing American individualism." A new John Wayne had arrived on set, albeit with far more muscular tone. Americans once more could exude strength by accentuating the male-dominated narrative, despite its inherent problems. As one more perceptive veteran has recalled, Rambo remained a "loner," his character only spending "time in jail in Reagan's America—a land he may 'love' but cannot seem to inhabit, except in prison or on the lam." Just as important, the victim-to-hero plot device turned the multifaceted experiences of the Vietnam War into a limited palette of acceptable tropes and clichés. The historical memory became flattened in a sense, with few opportunities for others besides the infantryman to be heard. But within the larger mosaic of Vietnam, no "real" war ever truly existed. Many others experienced the devastation of war just as much, if not more so, than the infantryman "grunt."


Certainly, popular wartime mediums occasionally conveyed women's experiences. The inferences, though, were clear. In 1968, the Washington Post published a story on the Women's Army Corps (WAC) in Vietnam, highlighting Glenda, who was “20 years old, slender and pretty, with the dating game running 300-to-1 in her favor.” Three years later, the New York Times noted that “traditional military siren songs continue to lure the women on: Travel, adventure, snappy uniforms, an abundance of men.” By the 1980s, television shows like China Beach shared with viewers more balanced stories of army nurses “coping with the horrors of war's casualties.” Yet critics disputed “the image of military nurses as being primarily interested in having a good time.” Even scholars assessing the merits of the popular television show did so under revealing titles like “Women Next Door to War.” Such exclusionary constructions of war outside the realm of combat simply helped confirm the myth that only men occupied the battlefield's physical spaces.

Opponents of gender desegregation in wartime, of course, relied on time-tested arguments against full integration of female soldiers into the ranks. (Nurses, playing a traditional feminine role, posed no real threat to men in uniform.) Veterans and wartime servicemen tended toward the relatively facile contention that women were not biologically suited to war, not strong enough to suffer through the physical and psychological excesses of combat. As the commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps bluntly put it in 1980, “War is man’s work.” Such dialogue was shared not only by American women—one WAC professing “Women are noncombatants”—but by the Vietnamese as well. When Nguyen Thi Dinh joined the anti-French revolutionary movement in the 1930s, aspiring to greater responsibilities, the men in her village discouraged her. “If you want to carry on revolutionary activities,” they argued, “you can do it at home, you don't have to go leave and go anywhere to do that.” Leave she did, ultimately becoming a member on the Presidium of the NLF Central Committee and appointed deputy commander of the South Vietnam Liberation Armed Forces.

If biological arguments fell flat, critics could turn to disparaging those seeking a greater women's voice, or those protesting the war, as angry feminists forcibly trying to carve out space in an arena where they didn't belong. Singer Eartha Kitt "stunned" guests when she condemned President Lyndon Johnson's war policy at a White House luncheon in early 1968, just weeks before the surprise Tet offensive. But such public denunciations paled in comparison to the ultimate femme fatale of the Vietnam era, Jane Fonda. When Life magazine ran a story of Fonda as a "nonstop activist" in April 1971, it did so under the byline "Nag, Nag, Nag!" Not only a longtime member of the "worst-dressed list," Fonda, according to the article, might have been a "sincere advocate" but "her command of facts and complexities [was] unconvincing." When the actress visited North Vietnam in the summer of 1972, long after Richard Nixon had decided to withdraw from Vietnam, she was following in the footsteps of more than 300 antiwar activists who came before her. Yet postwar patriots didn't seem to care. To them Fonda, photographed atop an enemy antiaircraft gun, had betrayed her country.54

Such traitorous behavior, though, barely registered at the time. Only after the war, during the Reagan revisionist era, did heckling "Hanoi Jane" become "raised to an art form." For male veterans protective of their postwar narrative, Fonda may have been an easy target but the attacks betrayed innate fears over their loss of masculinity. The sex symbol of Barbarella, according to Jerry Lembcke, had spurned them. Never mind that "heroes" like John Wayne stayed home during World War II while Fonda actually went to Vietnam.55 The point, rather, was that "Hanoi Jane" not only dared to question male-constructed policies - all while turning her back on American prisoners of war - but also forced herself onto the restricted preserve of speaking about war more generally. This character assassination, though, had far deeper gender roots. As Lembcke has argued, when Fonda stepped out of her assigned gender role and "emerged as a major political figure, she, in effect, became real, thus dispelling the mythical female Other on which the very identity of some of her male fans rested."56

But what of the voices that Fonda was trying to highlight during her visit to Vietnam, those living “with the land” who suffered under the weight of American bombs? Did not Vietnamese civilians and soldiers, women and girls experience war as well? By expanding the lens to include more than just the American combat soldier, does not a different war come into view? Certainly, contemporary reports noted that women had “surged into the front lines of North Vietnam’s defense” and highlighted how those in the south had been “ruined” by Americans who had “disrupted” their culture. Yet familiar tropes curbed deeper investigations into the relationships between women and the war. Stories on South Vietnam’s Women’s Armed Forces Corps (WAFC), when they appeared at all, spoke of Vietnamese “girls” trading “frills for war drills.” Few Americans seemed to consider there might be few frills at all for families living in the midst of a war zone. Unlike their American allies, the Vietnamese were living in an “all-encompassing and inescapable military space.” For them, no spatial boundaries existed delineating men at war and women at peace.

Of course, the Vietnamese civil war had an excruciating impact on mothers, wives, and daughters. Female political cadres spent months away from their families. Entire provinces in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos reeled under the relentless American air campaign. One Laotian farmer recalled certain of his villagers “died like pigs, like dogs. They bombed everywhere without any of us ever seeing them.” In the South Vietnamese imperial city of Hue, Nhã Ca wrote of “an atmosphere filled with death and panic.” To her, Hue had become a city “screaming and moaning in the throes of death.”

Certainly, not just American bombs brought devastation. In his novel The Sorrow of War, Bao Ninh shares the heartbreak of his girlfriend being raped by fellow North Vietnamese soldiers. No longer “pure and innocent,” Phuong now must live with her “new status as multiple-rape victim and brutal murderer.” This “hidden trauma” of war, as Viet Thanh Nguyen has described it, only exacerbated


the more visible sexual violence taking place inside South Vietnam. When young army lieutenant James McDonough comes across a dead village elder, her breasts “half-severed from her body” for taking in children “whose parents had been scattered by the war,” he and his platoon are left grieving over this “particularly grotesque” act. Thus, suspicion of aiding the American “imperialists,” and drawing the wrath of the NLF, left countless families in a state of perpetual dread.

Naturally, Vietnamese women were far more than simple victims of the war. Some served as “long-haired warriors,” fulfilling crucial roles for the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). Throughout much of South Vietnam they engaged in a “three-pronged attack” on Americans and their allies: “spreading propaganda and recruiting, performing support services to the NLF, and harassing the ARVN and police.” Others maintained the crucial logistical network along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, while still others served on village and district administrative councils. The female sniper, popularized in Full Metal Jacket, further illustrated not only the various military tasks women could perform, but also how the female presence could instill fear among outsiders grappling with their inability to distinguish friend from foe. Vietnamese women thus represented both a physical threat as combatants, and, as deceitful seductresses, a sexual one as well.

On the American side, assessing the experiences of more than just combat infantrymen equally demonstrates that women were more than just passive wartime observers. Nurses dug bits of shrapnel and bone from wounded soldiers, tried to


comfort combatants who lost arms or legs, and fought back against being seen as a "commodity because you were a woman."\textsuperscript{64} Red Cross "Donut Dollies" with the Supplemental Recreational Activities Overseas (SRAO) often served as untrained, volunteer counselors and therapists. One recalled the "fatigue and loneliness" due to work that kept her "frantically busy." Others served in local villages as part of the Medical Civil Action Program. Some officers, traumatized by the seemingly incessant death brought on by the war, "started to really hate the Vietnamese." Like their male counterparts, even women who "never had a prejudiced bone" before long started thinking of the local people as "gooks." Racism stimulated by the war's unrestrained violence, it seemed, knew no gender boundaries.\textsuperscript{65}

Of course, some American works did focus on women's experiences, even if they hardly gained the national attention garnered by memoirs of combat infantrymen. Lynda Van Devanter's searing memoir of serving with the 71st Evacuation Hospital demonstrated that moral injuries sustained from the war affected nurses just as much as those trekking through South Vietnam's jungles and rice paddies. After the death of one particularly young soldier, Devanter recalled that with his passing, along "with the deaths of so many others, I had lost an important part of myself."\textsuperscript{66} Winnie Smith's \textit{American Daughter Gone to War} revealed that women suffered equally in a place God had "long since forsaken." Smith anesthetized herself with alcohol during her tour and returned home suffering so much from the emotional damage that she nearly committed suicide. For more than a decade, she endured the anguish of her experiences alone because it was "too frightening to admit" she needed psychological help.\textsuperscript{67}


\textsuperscript{67} Winnie Smith, \textit{American Daughter Gone to War: On the Front Lines with an Army Nurse in Vietnam} (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992), 158, 299. More recently, army nurses have shared their stories via smaller presses. Mary Reynolds Powell noted how she and others had become "emotionally disabled" by the war in \textit{A World of Hurt} (Chagrin Falls, Ohio: Greenleaf Book Group, 2003), 137. Barbara Hesselman Kautz recalled her experiences leading to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms in \textit{When I Die I'm Going to Heaven 'Cause I Spent My Time in Hell: A memoir of my year as an Army Nurse in Vietnam} (Portsmouth, N.H.: Piscataqua Press, 2013). Finally, Diane Klutz shared that for many years she "didn't want to remember—I wanted that part of my life as far from me as possible." \textit{Round Eyes: An American Nurse in Vietnam} (Overland Park, Kans.: TriStar Books, 2012), 81.
Male Veterans' Narrative of the Vietnam War

Further demonstrating the illusory spatial boundaries between men and women in Vietnam, female journalists covered the war in all four of the military command's corps tactical zones. UPI writer Margaret Kilgore shared the complexities of her post in Saigon: “The correspondent assigned to this war must be a political reporter, an expert on tactics, more familiar than many soldiers on a vast assortment of weaponry, a linguist, diplomat, administrator, daredevil and one of the most suspicious, cautious people on earth.” When famed correspondent-photographer Dickey Chapelle lost her life to a land mine in 1965, she already had covered conflicts in Korea, Cuba, Algeria, and Lebanon.68 Beverly Deepe, of the Christian Science Monitor, had chronicled revolutions in Latin America and had “been in the field almost every week” after arriving in South Vietnam. Yet despite the vast experience these women brought to their professional work, old habits endured. As NBC News correspondent Liz Trotta wrote in late 1968, people at home and in Vietnam constantly asked her about “problems” a woman faced in covering a war. “Translated, this means most of the time: What do you do in the field when you need a ladies room?” Trotta responded by announcing her plans to write a book titled “Latrines I Have Known—A Survey from Bush to Barracks.”69

The focus on Trotta’s bathroom needs, rather than on her professional insights as a seasoned reporter, illustrated the cultural barriers in attempting to more readily incorporate women’s voices into the larger postwar narrative. The memorialization of female veterans followed suit. In 1993, eleven years after establishment of the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in Washington, D.C., Vice President Al Gore dedicated the Vietnam Women’s Memorial with a frank admission. “In the tense, sometimes confusing peace” that followed the war, Gore noted of women, “we never listened to their story.”70 The monument, however, continued the tradition of fixing female veterans in familiar roles. Three women bend over a wounded male soldier, a Christ-like figure laying in the lap of Madonna. As one former army nurse recalled, the statue represented women’s “roles as nurturer, healer, patron, which will tell future generations that women served.” Perhaps more importantly, though, female veterans saw the memorial as a place to help them heal mental wounds long buried from public view.71


And yet the memorial's sculpture, designed by Glenna Goodacre, hinted at an awkward truth. Women too helped further the construction of a memory giving prominence to the male combat veteran. When Eartha Kitt condemned Johnson in the White House, one governor's wife in attendance spoke up because she felt "morally obligated" to defend the war. The reason? Her first husband had been killed in World War II. The episode demonstrated that some wives and mothers willfully participated in furthering myths of the "forgotten" Vietnam veteran being disparaged or not welcomed home properly. In part, these women benefited from such a narrative. They too could serve the nation, compassionate wives and strong mothers who kept families intact for warrior husbands fighting as protectors of the body politic. Such women considered themselves a "special breed," able to endure and thrive despite enormous sacrifices.72

In the process, they not only fulfilled the traditional role of caretaker in war and its aftermath, but also carved out a special preserve as the loyal, patriotic wife or mother. By sacrificing a son for the nation, as an example, did not a woman become inviolable within the public sphere? Even a Gold Star Mother whose son had been killed in Vietnam could safely request amnesty for all war resisters because she did not want her son's life to "have been wasted if there is no visible gain for our country for their loss." The grieving mother thus could assist with national reconciliation and redemption, helping restore peace and honor after a divisive conflict. In the act of mourning the combat soldier, the wife or mother could become a sacrosanct member of the larger "warrior" community, even if she was not physically accepted into that community. She also became complicit in perpetuating the myth that only men in combat knew the true horrors of war.73

Allying oneself with the male soldier held prospective political rewards as well. Presidents during the Cold War often spoke in terms of American credibility, prestige, and vitality that easily meshed with their own perceptions of the masculine persona. Lyndon Johnson, for instance, shared with biographer Doris Kearns his fears of betraying the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. "That I had let a democracy fall into the hands of the Communists. That I was a coward. An unmanly man. A man without a spine." In this sense, American exceptionalism became a gender-based story. Only real men, either in the political arena or on the battlefield, could secure the nation's reputation. Only through masculine deeds could men allay their fears of being consumed by a feminized, timid society.74


Perhaps it was no coincidence then that veterans pushed for a memorial specifically honoring the band of brothers in Vietnam. A new representation could serve as a corrective to designer Maya Lin's memorial, a wall that one vet disparaged as a "black gash of shame." Frederick Hart's *The Three Soldiers*, dedicated on Veteran's Day in 1984, told a story of resilience rather than somber reflection. The multiracial trio of "fighting men," though weary, are lean, muscular, determined. As President Reagan declared at the unveiling ceremony, "They reflected the best in us."75

This impulse to quite literally reconstruct the memory of a lost war rested upon deep anxieties, upon what neocconservative pundit Norman Podhoretz called a "shell-shocked condition that has muddled our minds and paralyzed our national will since Vietnam." Conceptualizing the postwar narrative in a certain way thus served as an effective means for men to regain power, both in private and public spheres. The payment for this chronicling came in the silencing of women's voices. Moreover, as one report found, female veterans "had good reason to hide their pain." Nurses with psychiatric disorders could lose their licenses; mothers, custody of their children. Besides, as one army nurse was told by a prospective publisher for her memoirs, "no one wanted to read about women at war."76

To many men, such costs for maintaining the male veteran identity at a time when more and more women were joining the armed forces seemed well worth spending. The professional, even sexual, challenges posed by female soldiers entering the AVF in the early 1970s appeared to undercut the most basic assumptions on gender roles. It did not seem to matter that WAC leaders emphasized femininity and the "high moral standards" of all those serving in the Women's Army Corps. Dispirited male veterans, already "cut off from our units, our clans," viewed women in uniform as a sort of oppositional party. By reimagining the narrative, by extolling the sacrifices of those who served on battlefields where supposedly no women roamed, men could justify claims of their special contributions to the nation. And to their assertions that only they could restore the United States to its rightful place of global dominance.77


This bolstering of masculine stereotypes proved more than just a simple retelling of traditional, culturally comfortable stories. By entwining their own version of Vietnam with the larger process of national healing, male veterans could contest indictments that they had failed as warriors and thus as men. If the conflict in and outcome of Vietnam had not empowered them, then perhaps the memorializing process would.78

Conclusions

The repercussions for narrowing America’s collective biography of the Vietnam War endure to this day. In our public memory, the “grunt’s view of the war” has become universalized, the warrior’s sacrifice deemed a principal reason for remembering. Favoring the experiences of the male “grunt” in the popular narrative of Vietnam has allowed Americans to glamorize war—even a lost one—as they argued then, and continue to argue now, that military crusades are the only way to keep the nation safe. As a result, we recycle flawed myths about war and what it can offer—that it turns boys into men; that it creates brotherly bonds inaccessible to civilians; that it is only the warrior who protects.79

But there is a shortcoming with this plot device. Heroic combat never served as the common experience for the more than 2.7 million Americans who wore their nation’s uniform in Vietnam. In reality, the “grunt” remained throughout the war a distinct minority. And so to exalt the combat soldier above all others, to link him with the highest form of patriotic nationalism, is to sustain a fictitious cultural memory based on a myth. In the process, worshipping only the warrior narrows our definition of honor. It leads to sham arguments that only men who have seen “real” combat deserve our respect. It seems, though, that far more others are worthy of our admiration if we only take time to consider their stories.80

Doing so, however, might require us all to reflect on how we define key words like “combat” and “veteran.” In a war like Vietnam that often blurred the lines between soldiers and civilians, such definitions are, in truth, less rigid than the conventional narrative would have us believe. Kathleen Splinter, an army nurse who served in Chu Lai, revealed the after-effects of vets too narrowly defining

78. On violence—and, thus, it would seem war—as a means to empowerment, see Miriam Cooke, Women and the War Story (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 97.


80. Patriotic nationalism in Rydstrom, “Gendered Corporeality and Bare Lives,” 286. Cultural myths in Karner, “Father, Sons, and Vietnam,” 91; and Zimmerman, “Gruntspeak,” 80. On heroic sacrifice, see McMahon, “Contested Memory,” 171. While male combat veterans may not have engaged in a purposeful public campaign to ensure they commanded the American memory of the war in Vietnam, male domination of that narrative most certainly did not happen by accident.
their wartime service. “When I first, I say, came out of the closet I never considered myself a veteran until my whole life was falling apart.” Had an inability to see herself as a veteran, to join a larger community of those with similar experiences, contributed to the postwar trauma disrupting her life? Surely calling Splinter a veteran, acknowledging the stress of her experiences, would not have diminished those of the combat infantryman. 81

Thus, how we define “war” matters. How nations, not just veterans, construct the cultural memory of war has wide-ranging social and political implications. The simplistic bifurcation that men equal war while women equal peace sustains the wrong-headed idea that war is a male-only arena. Such mythical divisions then guide us in determining whose wartime experiences are legitimate and whose are not. If gender indeed is a power construct that legitimizes inequalities, then what better place than combat to demonstrate that men are the fittest to serve, not only in uniform but in business or in the highest of political offices. Teaching sacrifice, citizenship, and patriotism solely through the lens of the combat infantryman, however, seems wholly insufficient to a nation aspiring to achieve the lofty ideals of gender inclusion and social diversity. And, in the end, we shouldn’t have to rely solely on a male combat veteran to tell us that. 82
