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It's My Country Too

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IT'S MY COUNTRY TOO

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IT'S MY COUNTRY TOO

Women's Military Stories
from the American
Revolution to Afghanistan

Edited by JERRI BELL & TRACY CROW

Foreword by KAYLA WILLIAMS

Potomac Books

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Set in Sabon LT Next Pro by Rachel Gould.

It isn't just my brother's country, or my husband's country, it's my country as well. And so the war wasn't just their war, it was my war, and I needed to serve in it.

—Maj. Beatrice Stroup, Women's Army Corps, World War II

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FOREWORD

KAYLA WILLIAMS

When I came home from Iraq and began the longer and more complicated journey back into civilian life, feelings of isolation and alienation often dominated during my interactions with people outside the military.¹ I could pick out military men from across the room: the haircut, posture, set of jaw. Civilians often could, too, and the common phrase would come: *Thank you for your service*. Out of uniform, this didn't often happen to me or the other women I served with. Even sporting obvious markers of military affiliation like bumper stickers or unit shirts was more likely to inspire questions about our husbands' service, rather than our own.

Seeking to understand my new identity after the fundamentally life-altering experience of going to war, it only belatedly dawned on me that I was a veteran and shared something profound with other veterans stretching back through untold generations. Yet even in books, movies, and gatherings of fellow veterans, I still often felt invisible. Erased. My experiences questioned or subtly discounted.

My first book, *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*, was partly a response to this marginalization. By telling my story, I wanted to give a richer and more nuanced window into the experiences of women serving in the global war on terror. Women who served in prior eras came up to me after talks to thank me for giving voice to experiences similar to their own:

1. This foreword was prepared in Kayla Williams's personal capacity; the opinions expressed are her own and do not reflect the view of the Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States government.

“I started to think I was just crazy. No one understood what I was talking about—but you went through the same thing!” It was humbling and gratifying, but also disconcerting: surely I wasn’t the first to share these tales.

Of course I wasn’t. But stories by and of women at war were not deeply embedded into the literary canon, enacted on stage and screen, commemorated in memorials across the land. They were scattered, hidden, erased, and hard to uncover.

Until this volume.

Jerri and Tracy have assembled an incredible trove of stories dating back to the Revolutionary War that ground the service and sacrifice of women serving today and tomorrow in the broader sweep of history. Each war in which we served was also another battle to prove our worth and the legitimacy of our contributions. Roughly a quarter millennium after we fought for freedom in the Revolutionary War, that struggle was victorious: women can now serve in any job and unit for which they are qualified.

While women today may not face the same legal and policy barriers to service that those who came before them did, they will still find much to recognize in these stories, from the astute observation from a woman who fought in the Civil War that “the biggest talkers are not always the best fighters” to a World War I nurse’s marveling at how easily humans get accustomed to sounds of “terrific explosions.” Many recount missing, years later, the sense of purpose and close relationships that developed while serving, despite the challenges and threats.

These essential stories illustrate the tremendous, ongoing effort toward full freedom and equality in which generations of women, people of color, and other minorities have been engaged since this country was founded. They are essential reading not only for military and veteran women, but for all who want a fuller accounting of how we became the nation we are becoming today.

PREFACE

“Too Often Women Were Viewed as Incidental”

One spring afternoon, a sailor and a Marine walked into a bar in the nation’s capital . . .

Stories with this beginning sometimes end with a bar fight. Our meeting, however, led to a yearlong collaboration and a new understanding of our combined thirty years of military service.

We began with the observation that contemporary books *about* military women are available and even commercially successful. But the voices *of* America’s women veterans rarely make it into print, and never with the same level of publicity or critical acclaim as those of their male counterparts. We felt that the public was missing something important about military women, though we weren’t sure exactly what it was. We were also frustrated that the women veterans’ stories told by others didn’t reflect our experience of service in the armed forces, or the service of other women veterans we knew. We wondered what we might discover if we told the story of women’s military service in America from the point of view of—and *through the voices of*—the women who had actually been there and done that.

The authors of the anthology *In the Words of Women: The Revolutionary War and the Birth of the Nation, 1765–1799* note that “too often women were viewed as incidental to the men who dominated the course of momentous occurrences and affected their lives.” This has also been true of America’s view of the role of women in the nation’s defense.

When *we* raised our right hands and took our oaths of enlistment and commissioning during the height of the Cold War, accession training did not include information about women's contributions to national defense. Trainers intimidated or said outright that our contributions were less significant because women only served in support roles. Women didn't command divisions, battleships, or air wings; we made only administrative policy. Men often informed us that women's integration into the armed forces was a social experiment imposed on the military by so-called feminazis who sought equal rights for women at the expense of military readiness and the national defense. We quickly learned to explain that we never took on tough jobs to prove a point about women, or to advance women's causes. We saw for ourselves that the services used women to fill manpower gaps, but when a critical need no longer existed, military leaders—usually men—once again restricted our roles and opportunities; but having also worked with men who supported us, mentored us, and pushed us to exceed expectations, we knew that the story that women were pawns of men who used our labor in times of crisis and cast us aside afterward was also only a partial truth at best.

In the process of writing this book, we discovered to our chagrin that we had served our country without knowing our own history. We didn't know whose shoulders we were standing on, whose shoes we should be trying to fill, who had set the example for women's service and leadership and what they had done, or what we might achieve if we ignored or chipped away at externally imposed limits. We certainly didn't know how women had come to serve in the armed forces, or what our predecessors had done and endured so that we might have opportunities they did not, and so that we might contribute fully to the defense of the Constitution. Nor had we known what it cost many of them to step outside the conventional roles society prescribed for women.

After reading hundreds of military women's memoirs, personal essays, diaries, letters, pension depositions, oral histories, interviews, and scholarly histories of women's participation in the armed forces, we realized that the excerpts we've chosen can only

be properly understood in historical, literary, and historiographical context. The service of our predecessors—and the ways in which they told their stories—can't be judged by modern standards. Women veterans of previous wars, some of whose narratives sound absurdly conventional and whose perspectives seem narrow to a modern reader, were operating in a different social and political environment than the one in which we served—a world radically different from the one in which women went off to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We learned that women veterans had voices. They published book-length memoirs and professional articles. Their stories had been overlooked, ignored, or dismissed as unimportant. Some even had long, distinguished literary careers (though they seldom wrote about their military experiences).

Their stories are not the stories we were told during our time on active duty. Nor are they the stories frequently told in the news media and other contemporary accounts in which women veterans are seen in limited, binary terms as either “she-roes” or “victims of the patriarchy.” Journalists, politicians, and others have appropriated women veterans’ stories for a variety of reasons. Especially in early narratives, military women’s stories were shaped and sometimes even changed to serve a political, social, or commercial agenda.

We have a different story to tell about the women who have chosen to take up the profession of arms. We believe that we have uncovered a unique historical and narrative arc—a new story about the military service of women in America.

Choosing from the stories we found wasn't easy. We decided to include stories from women who served unofficially, before women were “allowed” to enlist or to be commissioned into the armed forces, because from the earliest days of our nation women have fought alongside men and worked to ensure that the armed forces were competently supported and equipped. We selected narratives of cooks, laundresses, spies, and medical professionals along with those of women who fired rifles, launched missiles, and dropped bombs. If a woman filled a role now performed by trained and uni-

formed military professionals before women were legally allowed to enlist, we felt that she deserved a place in the ranks of “veterans.” To separate fact from fiction in memoirs of women soldiers written before the twentieth century, we relied on the work of professional historians.

We looked for the stories of both officers and enlisted women to avoid creating a contribution history, which limits its focus to a handful of successful, decorated women who are acknowledged trailblazers. We wanted women currently serving and those who will follow them to see themselves and their experiences reflected in these pages. We looked beyond the writing of educated, literate women to ways that others told their stories. Illiteracy or a lack of formal education and social stigma prevented many women who served in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from writing and publishing their stories; narratives of women of color who served in those times were most often passed down orally but never committed to paper. Too many have been lost forever. To capture some part of their stories, we used transcribed pension depositions in which clerks captured women’s authentic voices, and lengthy quotes recorded by journalists.

We did not anticipate discovery of such a rich, diverse first-person record of women’s military service. However, most of the stories could only be found in out-of-print books that had been self-published or had enjoyed limited print runs; in professional journals; in unpublished manuscripts carefully preserved in libraries, universities, and archives; and in personal papers. We could include only a fraction of the good stories we found. We cut thousands of words of excellent prose, retaining only the stories that best amplified the themes we found in reading scholarly histories.

Frustrating gaps remain. Too many trailblazers’ stories were told only by others, often men. We ran into dead ends in our research: for example, the family of African American Civil War spy Mary Bowser discarded her diary in the 1950s, unaware of its significance. Women who served in the Korean War era—like their male counterparts, veterans of the “Forgotten War”—reintegrated into civil-

ian society, and most chose not to talk about their experiences. We were unable to do justice to the record of women veterans of color—some of whom left excellent and candid memoirs—or to the complex intersection of race and sex that shaped their stories. We wished that more of our Coast Guard colleagues had committed their stories to paper.

We edited narratives for content and length. We removed or summarized passages that we felt were not essential to the stories. We summarized interviewers' questions, important in oral histories and even part of the story, if done well: we preferred to focus on the voices of the women veterans they interviewed.

We restored the correct spelling to Harriet Tubman's telling of her story to journalist Emma Telford of New York. Telford deliberately misspelled words to re-create Tubman's "picturesque Southern dialect"—a stereotyped "Negro" accent rather than the dialect of Maryland's Eastern Shore, where Tubman was raised. Restoration of correct spelling reveals Tubman as a storyteller with a sharp wit, a keen eye for description, an ear for the rhythm and music of language, and an understanding of the power of biblical allusion and metaphor in storytelling. We hope that we have accorded her words the dignity that her contribution deserves. We edited unpublished contemporary manuscripts for spelling, for punctuation, and occasionally for word use.

Finally, we copyedited for conformity with the rules of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, with a few exceptions for standard practice in military writing: "Marine" is always capitalized!

Had our first meeting ended in a bar fight, we know who would have won.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“*Kam sia!*” cried the beggars of the bustling Chinese treaty port of Amoy (now Xiamen). The Hokkien words for “Grateful thanks!” took root in the nautical lexicon as “cumshaw,” meaning something procured outside official channels or without official payment, usually obtained through barter. In writing this book we became “cumshaw artists,” adept at getting the help and information we needed in exchange for nothing more than our gratitude.

Dozens of curators, librarians, and historians came to our aid. We could not have written this book without the assistance, advice, time, and patience of curator Britta Granrud and oral historian Robbie Fee of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation. If you’re a woman veteran reading this book and you haven’t yet registered there or donated to the Memorial, please do so without delay.

Beth Ann Koelsch at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro helped us navigate through the Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and resources of the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project. Chris Ellis and Kara Newcomer at the Archives and Special Collections Branch of the U.S. Marine Corps Library; Nancy Wilt, Women Marines Association Curator of the Women of the Corps Collection; and Coast Guard Historian Scott Price steered us to valuable sources of information that we would never have found on our own.

Angie Stockwell, Collection Specialist at the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan, Maine; Kate Clifford Larson, author

of *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*; Sharon M. Harris, author of *Dr. Mary Walker: An American Radical, 1832–1919*; Eileen McHugh at the Cayuga Museum of History and Art; Michael Golden of the OSS Society; Anna Chovanec, Reference Assistant at the Syracuse University Libraries Special Collections Research Center; Amanda Vasquez, archivist for the Daughters of the American Revolution; and Marian Moser-Jones at the University of Maryland found no detail of our questions too insignificant, trivial, or unworthy of their attention and professional expertise.

Joel Thomas Webster in the Special Collections Branch of the James Madison University Library wrote a biographical summary for us, literally overnight, from a collection of one veteran's personal papers that had not yet been sorted and cataloged. Stephen Rice at the Connecticut State Library in Hartford found a historical newspaper article that we needed and sent it to us in a matter of hours.

We were awed at the expertise and bloodhound-quality detective skills of the librarians at the Library of Congress; the archivists at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington DC; College Park, Maryland; and St. Louis, Missouri; and the reference librarians at the Southern Maryland Public Library in Prince Frederick, Maryland—especially Carrie Raines and Molly Crumbley.

The Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) steered us to Captain Lory Manning, USN (Ret.), whose behind-the-scenes knowledge about equal protection lawsuits and the efforts to repeal combat exclusion laws made our later chapters immeasurably better.

Our research assistant, Noah Beall, saved us hours of work on the bibliography.

Kayla Williams agreed to write the foreword even before we'd finished the proposal. She made time to read the manuscript while she was moving her family back to Washington DC and starting her new job as the director of the Center for Women Veterans. Kayla, we love you.

To our team at the University of Nebraska Press and Potomac Books—Bridget Barry, Kristin Elias Rowley, Thomas Swanson, Emily Wendell, Elizabeth Zaleski, and Colleen Romick Clark—we

thank you for your earliest belief in this project and for your unwavering support as this project changed and expanded from the original proposal.

We are grateful to the women veterans who shared their original essays with us, and to the women who graciously contributed oral histories and personal papers to the Women’s Memorial; the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at UNC Greensboro; the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress; and university libraries. We salute their courage and candor.

Finally, Jerri would like to thank the staff of the Veterans Writing Project and the contributors to *O-Dark-Thirty* for tolerating her distraction in the final months of writing; her husband, David Bury, for taking on more than his fair share of the household chores; her sons, Will and Jon Bury, for eating far too many soup-and-sandwich dinners; her sister, Joan Bell, for “holding space”; the “Desperate Housewives of Calvert County” for dragging her away from the keyboard and down to the gym; and her mother, her first female role model. Mom, you don’t realize how strong and brave you have always been.

And Tracy would like to thank her husband, Mark Weidemaier, who always has the misfortune, it seems, to return home from his life in Major League Baseball during the final weeks leading up to a book deadline, yet treads softly and offers all means of support. Tracy would also like to thank her daughter, Morgan, and son-in-law, Brian; her parents; her brother; Jeffery Hess; Libby Oberg; CJ Scarlet; Sam and Novella Kennedy; and the immensely supportive friends in her town of Liberty.

Last, but never least, we would like to dedicate this book to the women who are now serving America on active duty, in the reserve, and in the Guard—and to the generations of women who follow. This is your *her*-story. We wrote this book for you.